THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS
JOSH REYNOLDS
FULGRIM
THE PALATINE PHOENIX

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'WE MUST DO THIS THING, AND DO SO PERFECTLY, IN ORDER TO SHOW THEM THAT OUR WORTH IS BEYOND QUESTION. IF WE DO NOT STAND ON OUR OWN NOW, WE WILL FOREVER BE BUT A SHADOW OF WHAT WE MIGHT HAVE BEEN.'

THE HORUS HERESY®

The Primarchs

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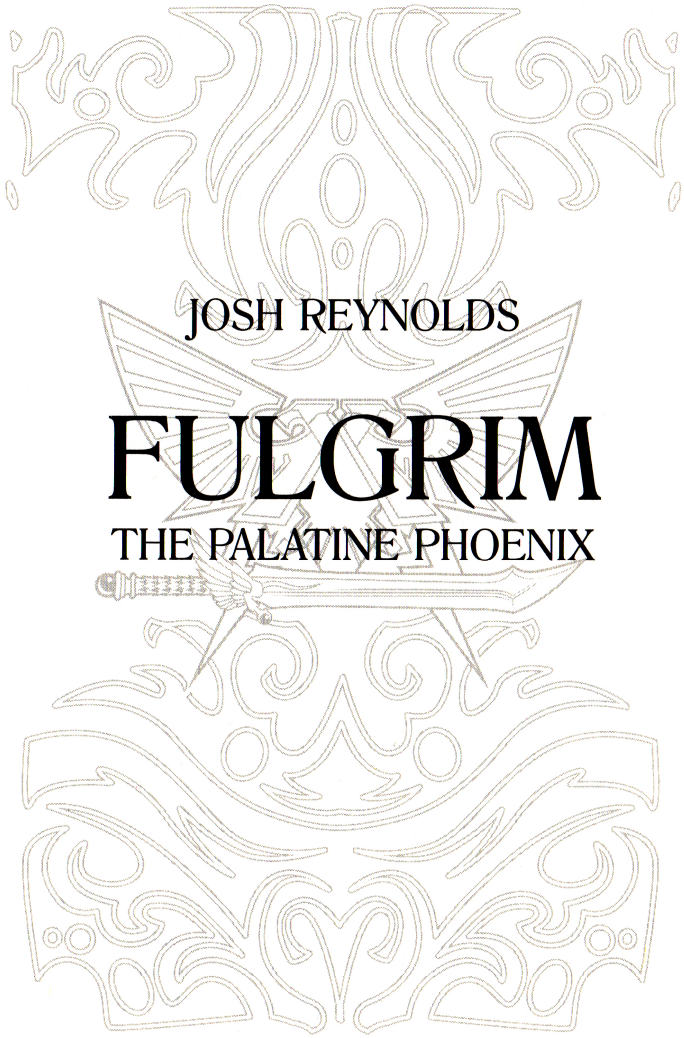

JOSH REYNOLDS

FULGRIM

THE PALATINE PHOENIX

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?

The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

ONE

Fire and blood.

It always came down to fire and blood. Or so his brothers, in their wisdom, claimed. Compliance was forged in fire and cooled in blood, they said. Skies of ash and fields of bone. Fire and blood.

A monotonous philosophy, lacking in even the crudest artistry.

It frustrated him to no end that such a belief was the guiding star of humanity's great adventure. Even the Emperor seemed to hold to it, though more for efficiency's sake than any other reason. Fire and blood. Efficiency and speed. The watchwords of the Great Crusade.

'Efficiency,' Fulgrim said, making it sound like a prayer. The Phoenician stared out through the glass of the viewport, idly calculating the distances between the stars that glimmered in the black. The observation bay of the *Pride of the Emperor* was dimly lit and stripped bare of all decoration. Here, there was nothing to distract one from the immensity of the universe, and the grandeur of the stars that populated it.

The primarch of the Emperor's Children was clad only in simple robes of white and purple, a mantle of feathers and gold draped over his deceptively broad shoulders. Armour was for war, or parades. Here, in his place of contemplation, he wore what he considered appropriately subdued attire. It fit loose about his lean form and added to the regal serenity of his appearance. His sole concession to practicality was the blade belted low on his waist. One hand rested on its pommel, and a finger traced the wires wrapped tight about the hilt.

A gift, that blade. A sign of love, forged in respect. He treasured it above all else, save his own certainty. The blade and what it meant were signs that he was on the right path. That he had not turned his back on destiny, but rather embraced it.

He studied the reflections of the amethyst-armoured legionaries of the Third who stood at attention behind him. Clad in thunderbolt and rayed sun, the palatine aquila displayed prominently, they seemed as the demigods of myth made flesh and bound in ceramite He stood head and shoulders above the tallest of them, a god among demigods, his white hair tied in a single serpentine braid. Violet eyes, set into pale features that were honed to sharp

perfection, narrowed in contemplation.

The six Space Marines arrayed behind him were among the best and the brightest of the current crop. Only one of the six was of the Two Hundred - the original remnants of the Legion who'd knelt before him on Chemos. A seventh, also a member of the Two Hundred, stood somewhat apart and behind the others, watching in silence. He nodded slightly, as if aware of Fulgrim's observation. Fulgrim stifled a snort of amusement.

Five of the six were eager young warriors, freshly blooded and bursting with the need to prove themselves. Much like himself. He pushed the thought aside, annoyed at the sting of truth. He focused on the others, noting their nervousness. To a human, they might seem as statues, barely moving or giving any sign of emotion. But to him, their inner turmoil was plain to see. The five did not know why they had been called into his presence, and it made them nervous. The sixth seemed to feel nothing at all. He smiled, despite this.

'What is the definition of efficiency, Narvo?' he asked, gesturing to one without turning around. A bit of showmanship never hurt.

Legionary Narvo Quin stiffened, obviously surprised to be singled out by his primarch. 'Victory through minimal effort, my lord.' Quin was a hammer amongst blades. A brawler by nature. But the occasional flash of insight implied potential. A common thread amongst them. Their potential was obvious. And this was all about potential.

Fulgrim turned from his calculations of the stars and their distances, holding the numbers fixed in his head. 'An acceptable answer, if somewhat pedestrian.' Quin shifted his weight, chagrin evident in his posture. Fulgrim continued. 'In truth, efficiency requires more effort than the minimal. And what is or is not efficient can only be properly determined through context. A lesson I learned as a child, amongst ore processors and mineral scoops.'

Without looking, he reached out and tapped the glass with a pale finger. Slowly, carefully, he drew a continuous line between the stars. 'What Horus considers adequate, for instance, others might call grossly barbaric.' For several decades, his dwindled Legion had fought in the shadow of another. Horus had shown him what it meant to be one of the Emperor's sons, with all the duties and responsibilities that entailed. A flash of perfect teeth, as he recalled the frustrations of those days. Then, the efficiency of wolves is a thing unto itself, and not to be judged by the likes of us.'

He turned back to the stars as a polite chuckle rippled through the group. 'However, we can judge our own efficiency, or lack thereof.' The chuckles ceased, as he'd intended. There was a time and a place for humour. He knocked on the glass of the viewport with a bare knuckle. 'My brothers leave behind them a trail of worlds broken to the wheel. Scars of fire and blood, carved across the face of the galaxy. I think - I know - that there is a better way.'

Another smile, swift and sure like the slash of a blade. 'A more efficient way. And together, you and I will prove it.'

He traced a circle around one particular point of light. 'This is Twenty-Eight One. Byzas, to its inhabitants, of whom there are several billion. A not inconsiderable number, given what it has endured of late.' He looked at his warriors. 'We will bring Byzas into compliance But not through fire and blood. Six blades and six blades alone will I carry into this battle You are those blades.'

Their faces were rife with emotion. Not just pride but worry and eagerness and calculation. They were young. Blooded but untested. This would be their test, and his as well. A new method of war, perfect in its conception and practice.

'This is the first step on a new journey, the beginning of a new war. One we will win, with our own hands and our own strength. This is the first chapter of our story. All else has been but prologue.' He tapped the mote of Byzas. There is a term in the Augean dialect of the Ionic Plateau - anabasis. The journey an army takes inland from the sea. The march upcountry to new conquests.' He turned, arms spread, like a king of old anointing his knights. This, my sons, is our anabasis.'

As one, they knelt, fists clenched tight against the palatine aquila that marked their armour.

Fulgrim smiled, pleased. 'I have chosen you six to represent the whole of our Legion. You will be my equerries in this matter. Think on what that means, and prepare yourselves accordingly.' He turned back to the viewport.

'Go. You are dismissed.'

The legionaries departed, talking quietly among themselves. Two more quietly than the others. One said nothing at all. When they had gone, Fulgrim said, 'You may speak freely now, Abdemon.'

He turned to face the seventh of those he'd summoned. Clad in Tyrian-

lacquered battle-plate, Lord Commander Abdemon was a walking example of all that the warriors of the Legion should aspire to be. His hand rested on the pommel-stone of the artificer-wrought power sword sheathed at his waisL The delicate looking sabre had been a gift from the armourers of the Ionic Plateau on Terra. Abde- mon was reportedly a swordsman of some skill, though Fulgrim had, as yet, not witnessed it for himself. At the moment, it wasn't his ability with a blade that Fulgrim required of him.

The lord commander was one of his senior officers, and a respected voice in his councils. Abdemon was respectful, without succumbing to sycophancy. Of the ten commanders of the first ten Millennials of the Legion, he was perhaps the most thoughtful. It was that inclination to consideration that Fulgrim needed now.

'What did you think?' Fulgrim asked.

'Very stirring, my lord,' Abdemon said. His voice was a soft rasp, like steel sliding through silk. 'I felt my heart quicken to hear it.'

Fulgrim quirked an eyebrow. 'Oh? You didn't think it was a bit much?'

'No, my lord, lust the right amount of jingoism.' Abdemon was Terran. He had been among those who made that first, fateful journey to Chemos with the Emperor, and knell at Fulgrim's feet. He had fought at the forefront of every battle the Third Legion had participated in, including Proxima. He had earned rank and respect in equal measure, and Fulgrim had swiftly deduced that winning him over was the key to winning the Legion.

That he was their gene-father had been no surety of loyalty, or love. Sons turned against fathers every day, on a thousand worlds. And the fracturing of the Legion had weakened the command structure to a concerning degree They were used to fighting as individuals, or as small groups, rather than as a Legion. It had taken long years on his part, and that of his trusted lord commanders, to rebuild their sense of purpose and their discipline.

Fulgrim snorted at Abdemon's words. 'You'd best thank whatever star you were born under that I have a sense of humour, Abdemon. Otherwise, I'd have you punished for such blatant disrespect.'

Abdemon bowed his head. White hair, bound in short, thick braids, was pulled back from his dark face in a tight bundle, giving him a hawk-like aspect. Fulgrim fancied there was something of him in Abdemon's aspect, though the officer would never be handsome. He doubted Abdemon cared.

'My apologies, my lord. I shall endeavour to curtail such foolishness in the

future.' Fulgrim heard the smile in the words, though Abdemon's face was as still as the onyx it seemed to have been carved from.

'And now you compound your insolence with bald-faced lies,' Fulgrim said. He laid the edge of his hand against the side of Abdemon's neck. Gently, only gently, but in warning all the same. He felt Abdemon's pulse jump, in sudden disquiet. Not fear though, which pleased him. His sons - the true sons of the Emperor - were above fear.

Fulgrim leaned low, so that Abdemon would feel the full effect of his voice. The lord commander's pulse quickened. It was no easy thing for a Space Marine to be in close proximity to their primarch. Abdemon handled it better than most, but even he was affected by it 'Carefully now, and only in private or I'll be forced to make an example of you. The chain of command must be seen to be maintained, Abdemon.'

Abdemon didn't meet his gaze. 'As you command.' A Space Marine couldn't be seen to disrespect his primarch, even in jest. Especially important for the Third, as their numbers were as yet still so few, and their morale only just recovered from the depths to which it had plunged in the years before Fulgrim had taken his place at their head.

There had been scarcely two hundred warriors remaining, by the time the Emperor had come to Chemos. A Legion in name only. A broken tool, badly used and in need of repair. Fulgrim had done what he could. He had visited the noble families of ancient Europa, renewing the blood-tithes, and had claimed the firstborn sons of a thousand worlds as his due. Slowly, surely, the Legion was growing again. But it was still weak, in the eyes of his brothers. Horus thought it too soon for Fulgrim to spread his wings and fly unaided. But even Horus could be wrong.

Fulgrim pushed the thought aside and stepped back, allowing Abdemon to breathe easily again. He fixed his subordinate with his violet gaze 'Give me your honest opinion, Abdemon. Have I chosen well?'

Abdemon hesitated. Fulgrim waited patiently, allowing him to gather his thoughts. Abdemon cleared his throat. 'Quin is the immediate concern. He's a rough edge Brutal. Flavius Alkenex, as well. They're line troops, not diplomats.'

'Which is why we need them. They're the stick, so to speak.' Fulgrim clasped his hands behind him and turned back to the viewport. The quiet reminder of what can be unleashed, if the situation proves untenable.' He

laughed. They're not as murderously terrifying as some, I admit, but they'll prove effective enough. What of the others?'

'Telmar and Thorn are eager and ambitious. They'll do fine. As will Cyrius.'

Fulgrim nodded. He had high hopes for Cyrius. A gifted swordsman and a keen mind. Of all those he'd chosen, Cyrius had perhaps the greatest potential. He would rise far, if given the chance. He hesitated, thinking of the sixth of his chosen blades. 'And what of the Apothecary, Fabius?'

Abdemon paused. 'Another worry. Talented, but prone to thinking himself outside the chain of command.' He frowned. 'He needs reining in.'

'I will see to that personally,' Fulgrim said. Abdemon's look of relief was almost comical. Fabius was another Terran. Scion of some minor house in the mountains of northern Europa. Like Abdemon, he was of the Two Hundred, and had been the only surviving member of the Legion's apothecarion. There were others now, but for a time, Fabius alone had struggled to hold back the blight that afflicted Fulgrim's gene-sons. There was a look in the Apothecary's eyes that Fulgrim did not like - a cynicism at odds with everything they stood for. He wished to correct it, and swiftly.

Byzas promised to yield new blood for the Legion. New aspirants, new tithes. Perhaps that would cheer Fabius up a bit. The primarch turned back to the viewport and renewed his calculation of the Mandeville Points. Abdemon cleared his throat. Fulgrim sighed. 'You have a question?'

'A clarification only, my lord.'

Fulgrim gestured lazily. 'Speak, and be illuminated, my son.'

'Why are we doing this?'

'To bring this world into compliance'

'But why this way? The risk outweighs the benefits.'

Fulgrim was silent for long moments. Then he sighed and said, 'My brothers challenge me. And as the challenged, the battlefield and weapons are mine to choose' He smiled. 'Russ thought he was being clever when he suggested I take command of the Twenty-Eighth Expedition. Twenty-eight being a positive integer that is equal to the sum of its proper divisors. Mathematically perfect.' He laughed softly. 'I would have expected that suggestion from Ferrus, or maybe even Horus, but never Russ. He has hidden depths, that one.'

'Well hidden,' Abdemon agreed.

Fulgrim laughed again. 'Now, now, that is one of the Emperor's sons you're insulting Abdemon. And my brother.' He paused. 'My mangy, flea-infested barbarian of a brother.' He glanced at his subordinate. 'I accepted the challenge, of course. It is needful that I make the true extent of our capabilities known.' He frowned. 'Already, those discovered after me have outstripped me in accomplishment We have lingered on our sickbed for too long Abdemon. Our numbers grow, but slowly, and our resources are unwisely diverted down ulterior paths by those who seek to protect us.'

Abdemon said nothing. He had fought alongside the sons of three Legions in his time, and the thought that they might be to blame for the current predicament, even unknowing, was anathema. Fulgrim continued. 'Do you know I think they pity us. They pity me. And I will not have it. We are not to be pitied, but respected.' He turned from his reflection. 'You asked me why? That is your answer. We must do this thing, and do so perfectly, in order to show them that our worth is beyond question. If we do not stand on our own now, we will forever be but a shadow of what we might have been.'

Abdemon saluted. 'As you command, my lord.'

Fulgrim waved him away. 'Be off with you. I have calculations to complete.'

Abdemon turned on his heel and departed. Fulgrim watched his reflection retreat, and allowed himself a brief moment of doubt. Was this truly the correct course?

He had allowed himself to be goaded, that much he was willing to admit. The urge to strike out on his own had been growing since the discovery of Ultramar, and what Guilliman had accomplished there. His brothers' success rankled.

Fulgrim had waged incalculable wars to save but a single world, while Guilliman and Dorn had ruled entire systems. The Legions awaiting them had numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and had swelled to greater heights since. His had numbered two hundred, and though their list of honours was greater than any, it was poor consolation.

Of them all, he'd thought Russ would understand. Fenris was but one world, as Chemos was. But Russ was arrogant. For him, Fenris was the only world worth the name, and the galaxy too small to contain its magnificence. He did not - would not - see the great tapestry unfolding around him.

Only Horus shared Fulgrim's understanding. Only Horus saw the galaxy

for what it was, and understood what the Great Crusade really meant. The struggle towards perfection was the only task worth contemplating. The form that perfection took was debatable, obviously, but it must be achieved. The galaxy was akin to one of the great mechanisms he'd repaired as a child. It had been badly used, and now needed a sure hand to return it to its former precision.

But was it his hand that was destined to do so? The Wolf-King thought not. The others seemed to share his disdain. Fulgrim bowed his head, suddenly weary. Seven voices, raised in doubt. Seven brothers, arrayed against the eighth. Even the normally contemplative master of the Second had broken his silence to accuse Fulgrim of hubris.

He snorted. There was an old Terran saying, about pots and kettles. He'd refrained from sharing it at the time. His quiet brother had no sense of humour that he was aware of. Perhaps that was why he spoke so litde.

But Fulgrim had pressed his case, and Russ had made his challenge. And so it was, for good or ill. Horus had tried to dissuade him, before their parting. The concern in his brother's voice had been palpable. But even he had not understood.

The Luna Wolves stood pre-eminent amongst the Legions. Their numbers were such that they could prosecute multiple campaigns at once. In contrast, there were barely enough of the Emperor's Children to fill this one, single ship. The training cages sat dormant, the mess halls empty save for the mortal crew. Even now, on the cusp of resurgence, they faltered. One wrong step could send them reeling over the edge, back into the oblivion they had only just escaped.

Fulgrim was gambling on the lives of his gene-sons, and their legacy. Only once the die had been cast would he know whether or not he'd made the right choice.

'I suppose I shall find out soon enough,' he murmured.

TWO

Narvo Quin lowered his arm, letting the weight of the power axe do the work. He moved quickly, despite the bulk of his power armour, from one stance to the next. It felt good to be doing something useful, after being chastised by the Phoenician. The air parted before the blade with a hiss, and he grunted in satisfaction.

'Fighting shadows again?'

Quin paused, axe extended. 'I was,' he said tersely. He spun the weapon lightly, cutting the field as he did so, and turned. 'Now I'm talking to you, I suppose.' The training cages on this deck were quiet at this point in the duty cycle. They were always quiet these days. He liked it that way. He'd hoped for a few moments of peace, to compose himself. Being singled out by the primarch had been both glorious and terrifying. He still felt the weight of Fulgrim's gaze upon his soul, and wished to hold onto that feeling for as long as possible.

'My gratitude knows no bounds,' Flavius Alkenex said. He leaned against the entrance to the training cage, arms crossed. Patrician and haughty, Alkenex was just on the bearable side of arrogant.

Quin disliked him regardless. Thankfully, they'd had little reason to interact off the battlefield, before now. Why Fulgrim had chosen him was a mystery. Alkenex leaned forward, a half-smile on his face. 'What do you think?'

'About what?'

Alkenex gestured. What do you mean, "what"? This. Us. The Phoenician.'

'It's an opportunity,' Quin said. A questionable one, perhaps, given those involved. Evenly split between those of Terra and those of Chemos, which Quin admitted - if grudgingly - was sensible. But including creatures like the Spider was just asking for trouble.

He twitched slightly, thinking of the Apothecary hunched in his web, his mechanical limbs clicking. Fabius was one of the original Two Hundred, and deserving of respect for that alone. But Quin had heard the whispers of the veterans, of those battered relics of ancient glories, and there was no respect in their voices when they spoke of the Spider.

Only hate.

Quin could not help but question why Fulgrim had chosen Fabius. It made even less sense than choosing a supercilious fool like Alkenex. He looked at the other warrior. What do you think of it, then?'

'I leave thinking to the officers.' Alkenex let his hand fall to the hilt of his sword meaningfully. 'Care to spar?'

With you? No.' Quin set his axe on his shoulder. 'You cheat.'

'I win.'

'Not always.' Quin's grin was a tight line across his face.

'No, not always.' Alkenex shrugged. 'Fine. What do you want to do?'

'I want to finish my exercises.'

'I don't think he likes you very much, Flavius,' a new voice intruded. High, almost musical. Quin grimaced and turned, glaring at the newcomers. Kasperos Telmar and Grythan Thorn. Both Chemosian, and closer than brothers. In Quin's opinion, there was little to mark the natives of Chemos out as suitable warriors. They were drones, drudges and dullards. That the Phoenician doted on them so was a constant irritation to him. And not just him. Telmar grinned widely. 'Then, Narvo doesn't like anyone. Do you, Narvo?'

'I don't like you, if that's what you're implying.' Quin rested his axe in the crook of his arm. 'Either of you.' They were an ambitious pair, seeking to climb the ladder of rank. Quin recognised the signs, for he had similar ambitions. There were holes in the command structure, and the Phoenician was seeking to fill them as swifdy as possible. Most of those who found their way into the depleted upper ranks were bom of Chemos. An advantage Quin did not possess. His blood was of the purest unbroken line in Old Europa, but that wasn't good enough anymore. He had to be better than his blood. Better than theirs.

'What did I do?' Thorn protested.

'You're friends with him.'

'He's got you there,' Alkenex said.

'I don't like you, either,' Quin said, pointedly.

Alkenex glanced at the others. 'I'm in good company, I suppose.'

Telmar laughed. 'We all are. The Phoenician chose us. He hand- picked each of us.' He smirked. 'Even Narvo. Though, for the life of me, I can't imagine why.'

'Step into this cage, Chemosian. I'll show you, well enough.' Quin stepped

back, arms spread. 'I was fighting for the Legion while you were still grubbing in the mud.'

Telmar's face flushed, but Thorn stopped him before he could answer Quin's challenge. 'Don't, brother. There'll be plenty of fighting, before long. And more worthy challenges' Thorn met Quin's glare calmly. That goes for you as well.'

'Don't think to order me around, Thorn,' Quin said. 'You're not my commanding officer, last I checked.'

'No, but I am.'

Quin flinched as Abdemon's voice echoed through the training bay. The Hero of Proxima swooped down on them as swiftly as the bird of prey he resembled. 'As far as you are concerned - all of you - I am the word Fulgrim made flesh. And I say play nice, or there will be a reckoning. Anything less than perfection, and you will bring shame to the Legion and our gene-father both.' The commander let his hand rest purposefully on his sword's hilt. 'Do you understand me?'

Quin bowed his head, as did the others. Abdemon looked around. 'Where's Cyrius?'

'Last I saw, he was with the old woman,' Thorn said, with the hint of a laugh.

Abdemon glanced at Thorn. That old woman, as you call her, is a respected diplomat and a member of one of the oldest noble houses of ancient Terra. Her blood is as pure as that of any warrior in this room. Remember that, and treat her accordingly?

'It is still not clear to me why we require the presence of such individuals,' Telmar said disdainfully. "We are the fire, iterators and their ilk are but what comes after.' Quin's grip tightened on the haft of his axe He was not of the Two Hundred like Abdemon or the Spider, but he had fought and bled alongside humans for decades.

Even now, the Legion lacked the numbers to be deployed en masse as the Luna Wolves were Instead, they coordinated with and, at times, led the other, more diverse forces in service to the Emperor. In his time Quin had led the household troops of ancient military aristocracies, and fought alongside howling savages culled from barbaric frontier worlds. They were as worthy of respect as any warrior of the Legion. He made to speak, but Abdemon beat him to it.

'And what use the fire, without that which follows it?' Abdemon tapped a finger into Telmar's chest-plate, rocking him slightly. 'An army is a mechanism, made of many parts. All those parts are required for smooth functioning of the whole'

Telmar bowed his head, suitably chastised. Abdemon looked at the rest of them. 'You four are among the best and brightest of those who will carry the palatine aquila into the wider galaxy. But do not allow yourselves to become so arrogant that you forget what has come before. Lord Fulgrim is right - this is our anabasis. But if I have learned one thing at all, it is that the march upcountry is often the most difficult.'

Abdemon strode along the observation deck, accompanied by the chill light of innumerable stars. The lumens were kept low here, at the request of the ambassador, so as to enhance the effect of the starscape beyond the curved surface of the viewport. Preoccupied, he paid little heed to the crewmembers who scurried respectfully from his path.

Quin and the others had been on the edge of challenging one another. Something that would happen again, he feared, unless their attentions were diverted. Nobility was easily polluted by pride. The Emperor's Children were encouraged to test themselves constantly, but the only worthwhile test of skill was against another warrior of the Legions. The success of a brother was tantamount to a challenge. Achievements were fleeting, and soon forgotten in the quest for the perfection embodied by their primarch.

Abdemon could still recall his first glimpse of Fulgrim, standing atop his fortress of glass and steel, executive robes gleaming in the waning light, a paragon of ancient Aten, given new life light years from home. Chemos was a drab, silent world, but where the Phoenician strode, colour and sound flourished. He was a beacon of hope, both to the masses of Chemos and his remaining gene-sons.

But for Abdemon, that hope was tempered by pragmatism. Fulgrim represented a sea-change for the Legion, even as its depleted ranks were swelled by unfamiliar faces. Abdemon frowned. The renewal of the blood-tithes with Europa and the addition of Chemosian aspirants had done much to alleviate the Legion's slide towards irrelevance.

Fulgrim had been their salvation. Both from the blight, and their own need to prove themselves worthy of the aquila they bore Their primarch had shouldered the burden of their imperfections as his own. Under his guiding

hand, they would either be redeemed or crushed utterly by the challenges to come.

Abdemon pushed the thought aside as he caught sight of the ambassador and her retinue. Her followers were a discordant lot - junior iterators, scribes, and members of the petty nobility from a dozen newly compliant worlds. They had all but colonised this deck for their own, and he was aware of the wary attentions of her bodyguards, among the raucous flock. He returned the favour, though not obviously.

There were twelve of them, scattered about the observation deck. Patrician-killers, dressed in finery, but bearing weapons of utilitarian make Noble of bearing, but with an underlying savagery that he approved of. Men and women used to games of death and deceit, capable of chattering like courtiers, even as they calculated the force necessary to cripple or kill. Rumour had it that they were culled from among the extraneous children of Europa's noblest bloodlines - those who would neither inherit tides nor be offered up as part of the blood-tithe. There was said to be a facility somewhere on Luna, where such individuals were trained in the killing arts and then sold on to the highest bidder.

The ambassador was herself a product of the ancient bloodlines, able to trace her lineage to the dusk-rimes before the fall of Old Night She was one of the last of the old breed of iterator, more flamboyant in personality than was currently acceptable. As the Great Crusade grew in scope, so too did its apparatuses become finely tuned. Abdemon caught sight of her, at the centre of her flock of popinjays, watching intently as her killer circled one of his own.

'Idiot,' Abdemon muttered. Cyrius was pale, almost the colour of marble, and his armour had seen an artificer's touch. Delicate scrollwork marked the flat panes of ceramite, depicting scenes from Chemos' history. His hair was cropped short, his scalp almost shorn smooth, and his face a sharp mirror of Abdemon's own. There was something of the primarch in both of them, a subtle cast to their features, which marked them as Fulgrim's gene-sons. Perhaps that was why Fulgrim favoured Cyrius so.

Cyrius held his blade low, inviting attack. His skills as a swordsman were first-rate, but flashy. He was a duellist by inclination, as many Chemosians were. They possessed a strong thread of personal combat in their cultural weave. It revealed itself not simply in blade-work, but in all forms of

activity, even poetry and music.

The bodyguard was almost as tall as Cyrius, but slender. His features were on the cusp of androgyny beneath a latticework of duelling scars. He wore a frock coat made from an iridescent material, and a ceremonial breastplate marked with a leering gorgon's face. The blade he held was a fine thing, and well kept. Abdemon saw his limbs tense, but not the movement that followed. Swift, sure, certain and ultimately unsuccessful. Cyrius interposed his sword easily, blocking a blow that might have gutted a normal human and severely inconvenienced a Space Marine.

The bodyguard spun away, using the force of Cyrius' counter to carry himself out of reach. Cyrius laughed and started after him, as the rest of the popinjays clapped and cheered. The Primary Iterator, Abdemon noted, did neither. She simply watched and analysed.

'Cyrius, don't you have duties to attend to?' Abdemon called out. Cyrius froze. He bowed stiffly to his opponent, and turned.

'Lord Commander Abdemon. My apologies. I was-'

'Entertaining us,' the Primary Iterator said, rising gracefully to her feet. Golconda Pyke was older than she looked, and she looked very old indeed. Silver hair, cropped bristle-short on one side of her head, hung down the other in a shimmering wave. She wore a pair of golden pince-nez, balanced just so on an aquiline nose. Time had marked her, but like a sculptor chipping away excess, revealing the truth of her. Her dark robes were ornate, after the current fashion, without being garish, and lent an air of formality she might not otherwise possess. In their own way, the robes of an iterator were as much armour as the ceramite plates that covered the warriors of the Third.

Abdemon bowed slightly. A gesture of respect, rather than deference 'Primary Iterator,' he said. He straightened and fixed Cyrius with a stem eye. 'Find something practical to do, Cyrius. I'm sure there are duties awaiting your attentions.'

Cyrius sheathed his sword and crashed a fist against his chest-plate in salute. He turned and strode swiftly away, back ramrod straight. Pyke chuckled. 'A bit hard on him, weren't you?'

'He could've killed your man.' Abdemon said it bluntly, though the bodyguard gave no sign that he cared one way or the other. 'Even at play, we are lethal. It would be best for all concerned that such displays are kept

to a minimum.'

'Perhaps you're right, lord commander. Still, you'll forgive a foolish old woman her desire for a bit of excitement. It has been a long journey, and a rather boring one.'

Abdemon grunted and Pyke gestured airily. Her popinjays scattered, flying hither and yon in a swirl of colour, leaving behind the echoes of laughter. The bodyguards stayed, though remained at a respectable distance, faces turned outwards. Pyke motioned to a marble bench. 'Sit. I assume it will bear your weight.'

Abdemon sat down. He noted the small table set beside her, and the fluted glass decanter sitting on it. A fruity aroma slipped from it. Not unpleasant. Some form of alcoholic liquid, he judged. 'So?' said Pyke.

Abdemon smiled thinly. 'There's an old Terran expression about herding felinoids, and the difficulties thereof.' He laughed. 'The felinoids might be easier.' He glanced after the departed Cyrius. That one, especially.'

'Given what I've observed, possibly true.' She swirled her glass. 'Here, have a taste and tell me what you think.'

Abdemon gingerly took the glass, careful not to shatter it. He sipped the wine. Pyke waited expectantly. 'Well?' she asked.

'It's wine.'

'Good wine.'

'If you say so.' He handed the glass back to her. Unlike many in the Legion, Abdemon had little interest in such things. His art was war, and his skills did not extend much past it.

She sighed. 'Close to being perfect, in fact. Just one of the many notable exports Twenty-Eight One produces.'

'And the others?'

'Nothing ostensibly useful. It's a world of artisans and vintners, mostly. Which might be why your Phoenician chose it' She observed him across the rim of the glass. 'He's trying to prove a point, isn't he?'

Abdemon hesitated, suddenly uncomfortable. Lord Fulgrim's motivations were his own, and not a fit subject for discussion, especially with someone outside the Legion. 'Possibly. Though I'm at a loss as to what it might be.'

Pyke chuckled. 'You're a bad liar.'

'You're not the first to say that.' Abdemon shook his head. 'It's the truth, nonetheless. I suspect, nothing more.'

'Share your suspicions, then.' Pyke sipped her wine.

He looked at her, frowning. Pyke spoke not with only her voice, but that of others. She was influential, and had the ear of certain highly placed individuals in the palace. Sometimes talking to her felt like reporting to the entirety of the War Council. He cleared his throat. 'He's angry. And ambitious.'

Pyke nodded. 'A bad combination, normally. But in this case, it might prove beneficial.' She swirled her glass again, watching as the liquid sloshed. Abdemon couldn't help but admire her control; anyone else would have spilled it by now. Twenty-Eight One - Byzas - has the potential to be something more than just another tally on the board. If he were any of the others, that potential might be stunted, or worse, lost entirely.'

'Guilliman-' Abdemon began.

'It has been said that the Lord of Ultramar sees little else besides the primacy of his own culture For him, all worlds might as well be Ultramar.' Pyke waved aside his objections. 'I am well aware that I am being a trifle ungenerous, lord commander. But a woman can only hear the words 'practical' and 'theoretical'' so many times before she loses all patience At least your felinoids, rambunctious as they are can discuss something other than military theory.'

Abdemon chuckled. 'Lord Fulgrim encourages a certain robustness of learning, it's true. Then, we've never needed much in the way of encouragement when it comes to self-improvement.'

'And that, my friend, is why I asked to accompany this particular expedition.' Pyke smiled, but the expression faded swiftly. There are concerns among the military high command. Until recently, the Third Legion was one of the most dependable, in terms of internal cooperation. Lord Fulgrim's time with Lupercal appears to have put paid to that. He seeks to go his own way, as the others have.'

'You mean our warriors are no longer a resource to be spent freely.' Abdemon frowned as he said it. He knew that the aid of the Emperor's Children had been invaluable, in regards to certain military efforts. The Antarctic Clearance, the Fifth Raising of Jove-Sat II, a hundred other campaigns, all successfully prosecuted through the efforts of the Emperor's Children. But those efforts were rarely acknowledged save in the most detailed analysis of the conflicts in question.

Pyke sipped from her glass. 'That was mentioned, yes.' She studied the dark liquid. 'Regardless, it's in everyone's best interests for the Third to come into its own once more. The question is one of timing. More and more, it is becoming evident that the Emperor intends for his sons to prosecute this war, and for the rest of us to follow along dutifully in their wake. That does not sit well with some.'

'You?'

Pyke gave an elegant shrug. 'I am a diplomat, not a soldier. And having an army of seven-foot-tall killing machines at my back makes diplomacy much easier, on the whole.' She emptied her glass and set it aside. 'Byzas is important. It might be the salvation of your Legion. But it might also be its breaking. It is up to us to ensure that it is the one, and not the other.'

Fabius stood in his apothecarium, eyes closed, seemingly enraptured by the quiet rhythms of a Terran concerto. The sound of it swelled, filling the circular confines of the apothecarium. Fulgrim paused on the threshold, listening. The composition was lacking in grace, but there was a certain brutal elegance to it. The look of serenity on Fabius' face was such that he almost hated to disturb him. 'Apothecary,' he said, after a moment.

The music clicked off. Fabius turned. He was sallow-featured and gaunt. Dark circles marked his eyes and his white hair was unbound. He smelled of chemicals, and beneath that, old blood. The thin limbs of his medicae harness clicked and whirred about him, continuing its appointed tasks even as Fabius bowed his head and thumped his chest in greeting. The gesture was perfunctory, rather than respectful. Instinct, not inclination. 'My lord.' His voice was thin and ragged. Like the whine of a bone saw.

'I did not expect to find you here, Fabius. It is not currently your duty cycle.'

'I... have grown used to a more expansive cycle, my lord.'

Fulgrim smiled. A careful phrasing, if not quite an outright fabrication. Fabius, by all reports, did not rest. He might as well have been an automaton, engaged in a perpetual task. Under different circumstances, such dogged determination might have seen him rise high in the ranks of the apothecarion. But Fabius cared little for rank, or the trappings thereof. Only the work mattered. Fulgrim had known men of similar disposition on Chemos. Left unattended, they would work themselves to death.

From the look of him, Fabius was heading in that direction. As yet, the Legion's apothecarion was without a master. Fabius was the sole survivor of the original command structure, but his current rank did not refleat that. No one had got around to promoting him before Fulgrim's arrival, and he'd refused the honour since, out of humility, or perhaps spite. Knowing Fabius as he did, Fulgrim suspected that it was a bit of both.

But the apothecarion was beginning to flourish anew, under Fabius' somewhat distracted care He taught as easily as he breathed, when he could be bothered to do either. The newer recruits looked up to him, even as the older ones whispered darkly about the things he'd been forced to do, when the blight had raged openly through the ranks.

Fulgrim had made a careful study of those mutterings. The Two Hundred were a force to be reckoned with, within the Legion command structure Even as he sought to redefine and maintain the rigid lines of authority necessary in a unified force, there was yet an unofficial hierarchy. It would not do to stamp it out entirely - such things were useful, at times - but he would not allow it to endanger the Legion's future.

Thus, he had done his best to quash all hint of wrongdoing on Fabius' part. The Apothecary was a necessary evil. Besides Fulgrim, he alone fully comprehended the chasm the Legion had only just skirted the edge of, and how easy it would be to slip into it, even now. If the blight was to be cured, then Fabius was the one to cure it. Chemos had taught him that it was best to have the right man for the task. Fabius had chosen his duty, and Fulgrim would let him see it through.

Fulgrim looked down at him. 'You do not seem best pleased at the honour I have bestowed upon you, Fabius.'

Fabius hesitated. 'There is much work yet to be done. Things to *see* to. Preparations to be made.' He frowned. 'Might I formally request that you choose another in my place?'

Fulgrim studied him. 'I have just said that it was an honour.'

Fabius bowed his head. 'Yes. But I-'

Fulgrim held up a hand, cutting Fabius' protest short. 'Do you know what they call you, when they think you are not listening?'

'The Spider.'

Fulgrim nodded. 'There are spiders, of a sort, on Chemos. They are industrious' creatures, ever spinning their webs; never slowing, never

stopping. They refine chemical sludge into a crystalline latticework of impossible perfection. Perhaps it is a compliment.' Fabius said nothing, but from the look on his face, Fulgrim could tell that he didn't think so. Even for one so isolated as Fabius, the distaste of his brothers stung. That might change in time, if things continued as they were.

'Compliment or not, they are right. You are a spider, through no fault of your own. But that is not what you were meant to be, Fabius. For too long you have spun your webs and kept to yourself. I would see you among your brothers once more'

'My brothers are dead. And those who are not soon will be.'

Fulgrim almost struck him, so great was the flash of fury those words sparked. Abdemon was right: Fabius had grown too comfortable in his web, outside of all authority. He needed to be reminded, and swiftly, of his place in the grand scheme of things.

'Your brothers live. I have declared it so, and even the universe itself shall not gainsay me in this matter. I have made my choice, Fabius. Accept it or not, but you will be coming to Byzas. That is final.'

Fabius bowed again, face pinched and pale. 'As you command, my lord.'

Fulgrim glanced around. The apothecarium was cluttered, though in a specific way. Spheres of influence, again. Particular and precise Fabius had grown too used to being alone here. Soon, the clutter would vanish, and the silence would be filled with new voices. The accoutrements of Fabius' main field of study would have to be transferred elsewhere. Somewhere more private. Fulgrim filed the thought away for later consideration. For now, there were more important matters to be discussed.

'Tell me,' Fulgrim said, his tone more subdued.

Fabius hesitated. 'My progress has been limited. It is not an outside agent but an... an internal flaw.' He fell silent. Fulgrim studied him.

'A flaw in the candidates?' he asked finally.

Fabius said nothing. Fulgrim turned away. The Apothecary's silence had been answer enough. The viral blight that afflicted their gene-seed was still a danger. A time bomb, ticking away within the cells of each of his sons. Even those born of Chemos were not immune to the malignant imperfection. The gene-seed was drawn from him; did that mean that the flaw was also his?

Once, such a thought would have been inconceivable. But now, it seemed

all too possible. Fulgrim's hand clenched about *Fireblade*'s hilt. He longed to draw his sword, to chop apart the apothecarium and all that it contained. To deny it, and in his denial, obliterate any hint of the danger to his sons. He felt Fabius' eyes on him. The Apothecary could sense his primarch's growing anger and he lurked protectively near his equipment. Fulgrim wondered what Fabius would do if he drew his sword. Would the Apothecary try and stop him, or would he stand aside as Fulgrim vented his temper?

The temptation to find out grew. Abruptly, Fulgrim closed his eyes His temper had become appallingly short in the years since he'd left Chemos. Decades of disappointment had frayed it to but a thin shadow of its former self. The weight of it all sat heavy on his shoulders, and sometimes he wanted nothing more than to return to the fortress-factories of his youth. He had been content, then, and his strivings simple. It all seemed too big, these days. His every waking hour seemed devoted only to the difficulties of his new existence.

Fabius was under similar strain. The Apothecary had striven against impossible odds for so long that all he could *see* was the fight. It occupied his every moment, crowding out all else, even discipline. Fulgrim opened his eyes and sighed. 'Ingolstadt,' he said after a moment. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fabius freeze. Fulgrim turned. That is where you are from, isn't it? A curious name - archaic - but with a certain potency. Do you remember it at all?'

Fabius bowed his head. 'Somewhat.'

'Tell me' A command, phrased as a request.

'I remember mountains. And storms. The smell of wood burning on a fire The feel of leather bindings beneath my fingers - a library. A true library, rather than a collection of pict-captures or data-slates. I remember the sound of music, echoing through stone halls.' The Apothecary blinked. 'That's all.'

'That is enough.' Fulgrim peered down at him. 'Hold fast to those memories, Fabius. Let them be your guiding star. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' Fabius said.

A lie, Fulgrim knew. But perhaps the truth, in time. He glanced at Fabius, considering. 'When this is done, remind me to promote you, Fabius. It is not seemly for a mere Apothecary to safeguard the future of his Legion.' He turned and left the Spider there, silent in his web.

And as he departed, he heard the music start up again.

THREE

THE FIRE-BRINGERS

The vast distance between stars was often likened to an ocean, by those with more poetry in them than practicality. Fulgrim thought the comparison apt. The remaining oceans on Chemos were all but empty of life, despite his best efforts, as was the void. The black between the stars was as lifeless as those grey waters, and as cold. But like those waters, there was life, of sorts, in its depths. Hungry life. Cruel life. He could feel the reverberations of the hull plates in his marrow as the *Pride of the Emperor* burned itself a path through the deep waters of the empyrean. He could hear the faint screams of the astropathic choirs in the depths of his mind. They dreamed terrible dreams as the ship's Navigator sought a safe course. Precious weeks were lost to the slow navigation of the anti-reality. But it could not be rushed. It must be done perfectly, or not at all, something Fulgrim appreciated despite his frustration at the inevitable delays. Still, a crude business, warp travel. Inefficient. Imperfect. Perhaps one day, he might turn his mind to improving it.

For now, Fulgrim had other, more immediate concerns. He weighed the

sword in his hand, considering. Then, he spun with an almost languid motion, letting the blade carry him where it would. *Fireblade*, like all good weapons, had a mind of its own. There was something of its maker in it - a filament of anger, ever pulsing, waiting to be unsheathed and set into motion. The artist and the art were often inseparable, and there was always something of the one in the other, regardless of intent.

He laughed to himself, remembering Ferrus' look of incomprehension when he'd tried to explain it. His silver-limbed brother had an instinctive grasp of machinery, from the most primitive clockwork to the most advanced cogitating systems. But art was beyond him. Or so he claimed. Fulgrim suspected that Ferrus Manus' creativity ran deeper than he thought.

'We are wells yet untapped,' Fulgrim murmured. A saying of Horus'. They all had their secrets, their hidden passions. What was a man but a tangle of secrets? Not that they were men. But demigods were as entitled to secrets as the mortals who worshipped them.

He flinched back from the thought. Worship was a taboo word in his father's kingdom. There was no worship, for there were no gods. No demigods. Only the Emperor and His sons, and the Imperium they would rule together.

He fell into an easy rhythm, moving in loose circles about his private quarters. Every circle was a dance step and an attack in one. He had learned the war-rhythms from the Sulpha in his youth. The Sulpha tribes had produced pre-eminent swordsmen and not much else. They had been nomads, and they'd believed that the only fit occupations for men were making war and dancing. Two things they did quite well.

He stopped, falling out of the rhythm instantly. The Sulpha had been broken, at his command. All that remained of them now were the lessons he'd learned in his time with them. They had been the last obstacle to his control of Chemos. A wild folk, unable to adapt to changing times, they had threatened the perfection he'd envisioned. And so, he had destroyed them, one clan at a time, tribe by tribe.

Some few Sulpha remained, scattered throughout the Legion. But as a culture, they were nothing more than one memory amongst many. Still holding *Fireblade* extended, both hands tight about the hilt, Fulgrim bowed his head. 'I am sorry,' he murmured. He closed his eyes. The obliteration of the Sulpha had been a necessary evil. That didn't make the weight any

easier to bear, however. He sometimes wondered what would have happened had he been found by such a primitive folk, rather than a downtrodden pair of factory workers. Would he have been more like Russ, or even Horus? Perhaps that might have been better. For them, imperfection was somehow turned into strength.

He turned swiftly, letting the blade slide through his hands. It caught the light, and sheared through it, casting reflected shards in every direction. Corrin and Tullea had been capable parents, at best. Life in the fortress-factory of Callax had broken them early, and they withered, even as he flourished. He rotated his wrists, angling the blade, and brought it around until it extended towards an isolated nook, where two small plinths stood. Atop each plinth was a bust. One of Corrin and one of Tullea. Plain marble, with no colour or gilt to distinguish them. Almost identical in their expressions of weary acceptance, it was hard to tell which was which at times, even for him.

'You did the best you could,' he said softly, in benediction. Their imperfections had been no fault of their own. He spun on his heel, drawing the sword up in a savage cut. He had taken control of Callax within a few months of being put to work there. Chemos had been dying then. Its mines tapped, its ores plundered. Civilisation faltered, crumbling at the edges. The Sulpha had not been alone in their primitivism, merely the largest group. He remembered those first, fierce brawls against the cannibal tribes inhabiting factories gone cold many centuries past. The doomed expedition to Deep Processor One, and the monstrous thing he'd faced on the fourble board.

For fifty years, he had waged war against the inevitable. And on the day he'd won it, he'd learned that his war was nothing more than a skirmish in a far greater conflict. That his light was but one of many, gleaming in a darkness more pervasive than he'd imagined.

The Emperor had come to Chemos and illuminated the Illuminator. He had set the Phoenix's nest aflame, so that Fulgrim might be reborn into a new and greater existence. But already that existence was threatened, both within and without.

He had made enemies merely by existing. He was used to that. On Chemos, he had been forced to navigate spheres of influence, as he slowly worked to break down and rebuild the old executive clan system. Like a machine that had outlived its purpose, the system had caused more

problems than it solved.

It was the same here, though on a much grander scale. A new bureaucracy was being born, to maintain the territories taken in the Great Crusade. And that bureaucracy had little love for elements outside its control. His brothers didn't see it yet - Horus, perhaps, had an inkling - but Fulgrim had grown to manhood among such mechanisms of influence. He recognized them instantly, and the subtle danger they could pose.

That danger was but one reason among many that the Third must come into its own, and sooner rather than later. His sons had been spent like bolt-rounds in his absence. A few here, a few there, but it all added up. The mathematics of attrition were inescapable And broken tools were soon replaced.

He would not let that happen to his sons. To his Legion. They would grow in strength, to rival the Legions of his brothers. The galaxy would be reminded of why they alone, of all the Emperor's sons, bore the palatine aquila. And it would begin with Byzas. He would conquer with six blades, where his brothers might need a thousand. Their superiority - and his - would be undeniable, then.

A blurt of sound from the vox-system caught his ear. *'My lord, we are entering orbit over Twenty-Eight One,'* Abdemon said, his voice shrouded in static.

Fulgrim lowered his sword. 'Understood. Assemble the others in the disembarkation bay. I will meet you there shortly.' He sheathed *Fireblade* with a flourish, and turned to bow to the busts of his foster-parents.

Fulgrim smiled.

'The ascent commences.'

As the *Pride of the Emperor* transitioned into orbit, Primary Iterator Golconda Pyke felt the old, familiar sense of excitement. The game was set to begin, and she could not wait to make her first move. It had been some time since her last outing. Compliance was often established at spear-point, these days. Once, it had been a carefully choreographed dance of minds, pushing and pulling against one another. Now, the Great Crusade was a sea of iron, rolling over any shore that defied it.

But every sea had its limit. Soon, diplomacy would again be in vogue, though she feared she would be too old to enjoy it by then. It was no longer

a game for people like her. It now belonged to younger iterators, with smooth voices and moderate opinions.

She glanced down at her hands. They were unlined, despite her age. She allowed few cracks in her facade, and those only for appearance. She had never been lovely, but careful application of age lent her beauty. The rejuvenation treatments that kept her in fighting trim would soon reach a point of diminishing returns. She had decided to lean into the curve and descend into obsolescence gracefully. After all that she had accomplished, she felt she had earned it.

Pyke looked up. The disembarkation bay was staggering in its immensity. Armies were meant to assemble in its cathedral-like interior, and waiting Stormbirds sat in ranks of three, wings folded. But there was no army here today, only a collection of musicians and a motley assortment of influential faces. The hum of many conversations warred with the music in the cavernous space.

It was a dolorous composition, and one she only vaguely recognised. Something from Chemos, she supposed, given the origins of the musicians. A drab little world, with equally sombre music. She listened politely for a time, and gestured for her hangers-on to applaud at the appropriate moments. Her popinjays - as Abdemon liked to call them - were mostly camouflage. Bright plumage, loud voices, silly opinions. They served to distract the unimportant and the foolish, so that she could see to things unhindered. They were more subdued than normal. Not unexpected, given the oppressiveness of their surroundings. Even her pet killers were nervous, though only someone who'd been around them as long as she had could tell.

Nervous or not, she felt better for having them close to hand. Diplomacy was a funny business. You never knew when you might need someone disposed of, efficiently and swiftly. A few bodies were always conducive to negotiations.

Pyke studied the other members of the delegation. There were a hundred of them in all. Lesser iterators, Administratum bureaucrats and military officers of various ranks and privileges. There were a few roguish sorts as well - men and women with warrants of trade, looking to secure economic or political ties with a newly compliant world.

They were all the invisible cogs of the machine that was the Great Crusade. Wars might be won by big guns, but someone had to requisition

the ammunition. And someone else had to ensure that the guns and the ammunition both got made. Thousands upon thousands of moving parts, all acting in concert to one man's will. She nodded politely to those worth the gesture, and safely ignored the rest.

Of those, only Herodotus Frazer seemed insulted. The current lord commander of the Archite Palatines had a high opinion of his strategic acumen, and was put out that she didn't share it. He was also of the opinion that compliance was best achieved by the sword, and that anyone not wearing a uniform ought to stay out of it.

Grey-haired and thickly built, Frazer was more scar tissue than man, and, like her, on the cusp of his last decade in service. Word around the palace was that his replacement, a keen young officer named Fayle, was impatiently waiting for Frazer to hurry up and retire, or die. Frazer seemed inclined to do neither.

Pyke sighed, and turned an idle eye to the Stormbirds. She'd been around military transports often enough to recognise when they'd seen too much action, and too little maintenance. But they were functional, and several waited on the launch rails, wings extended. The heavy dropships were capable of both void and atmospheric flight, which made them useful for depositing murderous, genetically augmented killing machines as close to the enemy as possible. Or for transporting diplomatic envoys looking to make a very definite impression on their hosts.

It was an adroit reminder to the inhabitants of Byzas as to what awaited them, should they not agree with Fulgrim's terms. What it lacked in subtlety, it made up for in effectiveness. Given what she knew of the military capabilities of the Continental Government of Byzas, ten of the gunships could pound them flat. Three were enough to make a point. She hoped they'd take the hint, if only for the sake of the vineyards.

The deck trembled beneath her feet, and the musicians abandoned their dirge for something a bit livelier. The Phoenician and his sons approached.

Abdemon led the way, one hand resting on the pommel of his sword, the other holding his helmet. His dark face was set and serious. Behind him, in loose formation, came the six Legionaries chosen by Fulgrim. She marked them off her mental checklist as they approached - Cyrius, Alkenex, Quin, Thorn, Telmar and, following a step behind, the Spider himself. While the others wore armour as ornate as it was sturdy, and moved with the lethal

grace of stalking predators, Fabius' war gear was unadorned and plain, and he stumped along with resigned determination. The only piece of equipment that had seen more care than absolutely necessary was the twitching medicae harness he wore. Its limbs and their assortment of blades, saws and syringes gleamed eerily, and she had the distinct, unwelcome impression that it was somehow aware of her scrutiny.

Her unease was forgotten as Fulgrim entered the bay. He cut a magnificent figure, she had to admit. Clad in amethyst-coloured armour, trimmed in gold, with a long scaled cloak of emerald green, he looked like a hero from some ancient myth cycle. The weapons he carried only enhanced that image - on one hip, *Fireblade*, the sword forged by the silver hands of a loving brother; on the other, *Firebrand*, a volkite charger that more resembled a work of art than a tool of death. The armour, she knew, was designed so as to give free rein to his inhuman agility. Sensible, given that he was the fastest of the Emperor's sons, by all accounts. Capable of movements that the human eye simply could not track.

His pale, symmetrical features were framed exquisitely by a high collar of purple, and the great, stylised eagle's wing sweeping up from his chest-plate over his left shoulder. Violet eyes, as deep as galactic wells, scanned the faces of those gathered in the bay, noting and fixing each. In that incredible memory, her face was saved for last. An honour, perhaps. Or maybe a challenge.

Either way, she stepped forward to meet it, as was her duty as Primary Iterator. She bowed respectfully, making a professional attempt to hide the bother it caused her. Great age came with great discomfort. 'My lord Fulgrim, you honour us with your presence.'

'Primary Iterator Pyke, a delight to see you again,' Fulgrim said, bowing low over her. Pyke fought the familiar, almost overwhelming urge to fall to her knees as she looked up into those impossibly pristine features. She'd met primarchs before, and even berated one - an event she suspected had used up her quota of luck for the century. More than that, she had bent entire planets to her will with one well-placed word. Purely in terms of conquest, she ranked high among the warlords of the Great Crusade, though few would admit it.

Perhaps that was why Fulgrim had agreed to her request, so many months ago, to join the 28th Expedition. Then, maybe it was simply that they'd been

without a proper iterator for some time There was more potential for advancement with the other expeditions, but Pyke was beyond such concerns at this late stage in her life.

Fulgrim turned, letting his gaze sweep over the others. He greeted them all by name, and spent a few moments with each, some longer than others. Through it all, Pyke watched him. Weighing his worth, seeing if what she'd heard was true. Each of the Emperor's sons was different. Some were, to put it bluntly, more human than others.

Fulgrim was at once both human and not. Like a statue given life, but with a purpose all of its own. A purpose that had only become more focused in the intervening century since his rediscovery. A purpose almost - but not quite, not yet - at odds with the needs of the Imperial Army. As if aware of her thoughts, Fulgrim glanced at her, over the head of Lord Commander Frazer.

He was not a fool. He knew whom she truly reported to. She'd made little effort to hide it, seeing no need. Best to have all such things out in the open. Kept hidden, they only threatened to trip one up at the most inopportune times.

At last, he turned back towards her, and once again bowed deeply. 'I trust Abdemon has seen to your needs adequately on the journey? My apologies for absenting myself, but there was much to be done in preparation for our grand endeavour.'

'No apologies necessary, I assure you. We were well looked after.'

Fulgrim smiled, and Pyke felt her heart twitch. It was as if he were a sun, caged in flesh. Every smile, every laugh, was a flare of light and heat, striking to the very core of her. She would have to be careful around him, more so perhaps than she had been around the others. Like the sun, he might reduce her to cinders and never notice. 'I would like you to accompany me personally,' he said. 'I feel it best that we present a unified front - militarily and diplomatically. Herodotus agrees - don't you, Herodotus?'

'You are in overall command, my lord,' Frazer said, glaring daggers at Pyke Was he jealous, perhaps? The thought amused her. She smiled prettily at him, and was rewarded by a twitch of his eye. Lovely.

If Fulgrim noticed the exchange, he gave no sign. He extended his hand to her in a courtly gesture. Gingerly, she took it. This close she could feel the

weight of his strength. Here was a being who could tear mountains apart with his bare hands, or swim through seas of boiling metal. It didn't bear thinking about what he could do to her, if he so chose Despite that, his touch was light. She recalled how carefully Abdemon had held her wine glass, and wondered if the whole world were like that for Fulgrim.

'Come. We shall take my personal vessel.' He gestured towards one of the Stormbirds. Its wings had a larger span than that of its fellows, and they were curved in a graceful backwards sweep. Its prow had been modified to a hooked point, in contrast with the blunt snouts of the other vessels. Fulgrim preened slightly, as she and Frazer made appropriately appreciative noises. 'I designed and constructed her myself in the armourium decks. She's the fastest gunship in the expeditionary fleet.'

'Is that important?' Pyke asked.

Fulgrim laughed. 'Only to me'

He led her towards the waiting gunship with stately aplomb. The assembled musicians began to play a slow, dignified piece. The music was tinged with melancholy, a hint of parting and sweet sorrows. Fulgrim apparently preferred it to the more triumphal arrangements common to these moments.

'I confess some curiosity as to the nature of your preparations, Lord Fulgrim.'

'I was reading the histories and works your people procured from Twenty-Eight One.'

'All of them?' Pyke was startled, though she hoped it didn't show on her face. 'There were over eight thousand separate volumes of history alone.' The people were literate, almost egregiously so. Whatever could be written down, was.

'And five thousand volumes of verse, most of which was concerned with rather tawdry agrarian imagery.'

Pyke laughed. 'Yes, they do rather overestimate the appeal of bucolic activities, don't they?' She glanced up at him. 'And what did you learn from your studies?'

'There's a vast gulf between poetry and reality.' Fulgrim frowned. 'Their dynastic system is beyond salvaging. There will be open revolt in one generation, perhaps two. The limited technological knowledge base left to them after Old Night is already degrading. In ten generations, they'll be

barbarians. In fifteen, barely human at all.'

'But for the moment, they're united under a semi-stable - if autocratic - government.' Pyke patted his hand, in an almost motherly fashion. His armour was warm to the touch. 'And we can work with that.'

'I hope so,' Fulgrim said, glancing down at her. 'I am magnificent, but even I cannot fight a whole world on my own.' He smiled. 'Though, the temptation to try is almost overwhelming, I admit.'

Pyke eyed him as they reached the gunship's boarding ramp. Was that a joke, or a warning? It was hard to tell with Fulgrim. 'One word in the right ear is sharper than a thousand swords.'

'And even a blunt blade can kill.' Fulgrim gestured. 'Our chariot awaits.'

* * *

The *Firebird* hurled itself into the void with a shriek of engines. Two more Stormbirds followed it, carrying the remainder of the delegation. Interceptors fanned out around the gunships in a loose formation. It was more for show than anything else. An empty gesture, to an inattentive audience.

Fulgrim and the others sat in a section of the *Firebird's* crew compartment reserved for Fulgrim and his immediate subordinates. The roaring of the engines was only a dim rumble here, muted by a special baffle-field he'd designed as a boy. The field's original purpose had been to protect the ears of deep-ore hauler crews on Chemos from the noise of their engines, but he'd adapted it for use in the *Firebird* easily enough.

The internal facings of the command compartment were decorated with delicately crafted mosaics, depicting representative scenes from the history of the Legion. One scene in particular drew Fulgrim's eye - the Proximan Betrayal.

A defining moment for his sons, and one he'd missed. Insurrectionists armed with a Vortex weapon had almost killed the Emperor during the Proxima compliance ceremonies. Only the efforts of the Legion's Sixteenth Cohort and the Legio Custodes had enabled the Emperor to escape the trap the rebels had laid for him. They had bought his life with their blood, and died to a man. The remainder of the Legion had made Proxima pay for the insult, eventually burning the planet to its bedrock from orbit.

The Emperor's Children had earned the right to bear the palatine aquila for

their efforts on Proxima. Another honour earned without him. Another victory, built on the bones of dead legionaries. Dead warriors who might not have died, had he been there.

Fulgrim glanced at Abdemon and the others, farther back in the compartment, wondering which of them might soon join the dead. Perhaps not now, but later. Death was an inevitability no legionary could resist. He quashed the thought before it could go any further. To contemplate inevitability was to surrender to it. And he had never been guilty of that.

Sometimes, he dreamed of Proxima. Of Luna, and Jupiter. Battles where a primarch might have made a difference. Where the Phoenician might have led his sons to less costly victories. But such dreams were folly, and worse. To gnaw at the past was to threaten the foundation of the future. Best to let it lie, and get on with the work ahead.

He activated the hololithic projector set into the compartment fixtures. A flickering representation of Twenty-Eight One sprang into being before him. He'd installed the hololith in order to better adapt his battle strategies to changing information on the ground. If one was to excel, no detail was too small to consider.

Byzas hung lonely and silent in the void, accompanied only by a single, permanent natural satellite. A telluric planet, ringed by a somnolent, high-density debris belt, it was the only planet in its system capable of sustaining terrestrial life unaided. Fulgrim studied the hololithic image of the system, accessing the data packets compiled by the early-stage Explorator teams.

The debris belt around the planet had once played host to extensive ferric ore extraction facilities, but those had long since gone dark. The lunar colonies had been given over to a similar purpose, but their extraction rate had fallen well below the average, due to the increased pressures of subsistence production.

The continental government still had access to a small fleet of ancient interstellar craft - three, according to the Explorators, and one had been in dry dock for a century. The remaining two were only rarely unleashed from their decrepit orbital docks, in order to transport materials and prisoners to the lunar colonies.

Fulgrim tapped the hololith, narrowing the scope of study. Byzas was singularly unlovely. Even at a distance, he could see the scars of atomic warfare stretching across the southern continent. There was a reason the

Emperor had all but banned such weapons. An irradiated planet was a useless planet, save to the drones of the Mechanicum.

Another tap brought up a recording of the faint vox transmissions emanating from the planet's surface. Barely powerful enough to reach past the debris belt. Another indication of rapid technological decline Fulgrim banished the flickering ribbons of static.

'Entropy in action,' he murmured as he returned to his study of the planet. 'That orbital docking ring will succumb completely in a decade or less. The lunar colonies will be cut off and isolated. Some will perish in a few months, others will linger for years before finally going dark. An unpleasant fate.'

'One that can be prevented,' Pyke said. Fulgrim glanced at her. The Primary Iterator sat next to him, nearly swallowed up by her grav-hamess.

'But not easily.'

'No,' she admitted. 'But then nothing worth doing is ever easy.' She reached out and tapped the hololith, refocusing it. 'The continental government is relatively stable, thanks to an entrenched bureaucracy and several decades' worth of momentum. Remove a cog, the machine will continue to function. But the more pieces you strip out, the more erratic that function becomes. And the more necessary it becomes to have a steady hand in control.'

'Which it doesn't,' Frazer spoke up. The commander of the Archite Palatines sat across from them, alongside several of his junior officers. He stared at the hololith as if planning a planetary assault. Which, Fulgrim supposed, they were, in a way.

'Not currently,' Pyke said. 'Once, the slack could have been picked up by the other members of the Gubernatorial Triumvirate. Four generations ago, there were three continental governors and a united planetary government. Now there's just the one - Hereditary Governor Pandion IV. And a sorry specimen he is, as far as autocrats go.' Pyke smiled. 'Which is to our benefit, I suppose.'

Fulgrim nodded. The Gubernatorial Triumvirate had been bloodily dissolved in the last set of planetary civil wars. The end result had been full-scale atomic immolation of the southern continent, and the capitulation of the westernmost. There was only one continent now - Chalkedon - where before there had been three. Was it the result of necessity, or negligence? Perhaps it didn't matter.

'And he's just welcoming us with open arms, is he?' Frazer sounded doubtful. 'I've never yet met one of these backwater tyrants who wasn't looking for a fight.'

'Well, then this will be an education for you,' Pyke said. Frazer flushed, but held his tongue. Rumours about the Primary Iterator abounded. Some claimed she had the ear of the Emperor himself. Fulgrim knew better. She was one of the Sigillite's creatures, in all but name. Malcador was keeping tabs on him, as he did all of the primarchs. Watching them. Judging them. As if seeking out the means by which they might be humbled. An uncharitable thought perhaps, but true, so far as Fulgrim could see.

How his father could trust such a creature was a mystery to Fulgrim. Then, trying to understand his father's reasons for anything was like grasping sand. The harder you tried, the more it slipped through your fingers. In the end, you knew less than you did before you began. The Emperor was at once remote and ever present. An enigma, unable to fully shrink himself to fit the preconceptions of his sons.

And why should he have to? The Emperor was perfection itself - the ideal made flesh. If Fulgrim was the phoenix, then the Emperor was the fire that bestowed renewal. The Emperor did not lower himself to meet the expectations of lesser beings. So why should his sons? Why must the phoenix prove himself to those who might otherwise be prey to his beak and talons? Why must the Illuminator explain himself to the ignorant?

Some among his brothers maintained that it was a necessary humbling. They waged war, not for their own sake, but in the name of all mankind. But mankind had shown itself time and again to be a frail thing, prone to bending with the wind. Chemos had been a fruit rotting on the vine until he had taken it in hand. Byzas was the same. And like Chemos, Byzas would never truly belong to him. Was he destined to be a gardener who never enjoyed the fruits of his own labour?

This morose line of contemplation was broken by an announcement from the flight deck. *'Final approach in ten,'* the pilot said, his voice crackling through the compartment's vox system. Fulgrim deactivated the hololith. They were passing through the debris field. He could hear the *Firebird's* engines whining in protest as the pilots navigated the belt.

Fulgrim sighed and tapped the restraint of his grav-harness. The deck rolled beneath his feet as he stood. At his gesture, Abdemon and the others

did the same. 'So, we come to it, my sons,' he said, his voice carrying easily over the dim roar of the engines. 'The beginning of our anabasis. But a word or two of warning before we begin... These people have never seen your like. Do not allow their awe to lull you into a false sense of your own invulnerability.'

He looked around. 'You are demigods, but even demigods can die. By the same token, do not expect them to fully comprehend your capabilities.' He fixed Cyrius with a stem gaze and raised a finger in warning. 'No duels.'

Cyrius' face was unreadable beneath his helmet, but the slight twitch of his head showed that he'd heard, at least. Abdemon had informed Fulgrim of Cyrius' encounter with Pyke's pet killers. An error in judgement, whatever his reasons. He nodded, satisfied. 'We are as the Fire-Bringers of legend, my sons. We come to raise up the masses and cast aside the shadows of their ignorance. Act accordingly.'

He turned back to Pyke. 'Will you allow me to act as your escort, Primary Iterator?'

Pyke looked up at him. 'Of course, my lord. It would be my pleasure.'

The compartment rocked slightly. He could hear the change in the engines, signalling atmospheric entry. His hearts sped up in anticipation. Despite himself, he was excited. This was the last great test, and he was determined to pass it.

Touching down in five... four... three... two...'

The roar of the thrusters became muted, and finally fell silent. Pyke and the other senior members of the delegation freed themselves from their grav-harnesses. Fulgrim pulled his golden, eagle-winged helmet on. It latched into place with a hiss, and sensor readouts blinked into view before his eyes. 'Open the hatch,' he said.

The *Firebird's* crew compartment was filled with a watery light as the hatch cycled open. A roar of noise accompanied the light. Cheering voices mingled with the blare of triumphal music. Fulgrim smiled and held out his hand to Pyke. 'We shall disembark last, I think. If you've no objections?'

Pyke laughed. 'A bit of theatre never hurts in these situations, I've learned.'

Abdemon and the warriors of the Third were the first to disembark. The Space Marines, led by Abdemon, tromped down the ramp, bolters held across their chests, moving in perfect synchronisation. All save Fabius, who followed them, the limbs of his medicae harness unfurling like the petals of

some abominable flower as he cleared the bulkhead.

Fulgrim activated his armour's sensor-link and connected to the pict-feed of Abdemon's helmet, allowing him to see what the lord commander saw. The trio of Stormbirds had landed on a massive, flat stone dais, many hundreds of metres across. Broken support structures lined its edges, their irregular, rusting shapes strung with thick garlands of some pale, plump blossom. A jubilant sea of faces surrounded the dais, filling the immense plaza it occupied. Structures crowded the plaza on all sides, but the dais was taller than any of them. Fulgrim realised that it was actually the foundation of an ancient landing platform, and that the buildings around it had been built much later.

Through the pict-feed of their helmets, Fulgrim watched as his sons automatically spread out in a loose *stikhos* formation, placing themselves between the *Firebird* and those waiting to greet its passengers. 'Cyrius - pan left,' Fulgrim murmured, as he cycled through the various feeds.

Cyrius obliged and Fulgrim got his first look at the rulers of Byzas. A small crowd of dignitaries waited a safe distance from the *Firebird*. They wore thick robes of state beneath gaudy encrustations of jewellery he suspected were used to denote function and rank.

A line of continental government troops, in blue uniforms and segmented lobster-shell breastplates, stood at parade rest behind the dignitaries. The soldiers appeared to be armed with a variety of low-velocity, bolt-action rifle.

The cheers of the crowd had ebbed as they got their first look at the towering forms of the Space Marines. It swelled once more as Frazer led his junior officers down the ramp. The Archite Palatines were human at least, if a trifle exotic. The crowd of dignitaries jerked into motion and Fulgrim chuckled. Pyke glanced up at him. 'What is it?'

'They think Frazer is me.'

She snorted. 'They're in for a shock.'

'Best to get it over with then, I suppose.' Fulgrim escorted her to the hatchway and they paused there. The Byzan dignitaries froze halfway to the *Firebird*, and then milled about like startled birds as Fulgrim and Pyke descended. Silence fell across the plaza, and Fulgrim felt a small thrill of pleasure. The awe of humans was a heady thing. He and Pyke descended in stately fashion. She looked like a child next to him.

The silence stretched for long moments, until at last a slim figure stepped forward. A younger man, wearing a seal of state around his neck and dressed in more sombre hues than the rest.

He hesitated only a moment before prostrating himself before Fulgrim. 'My Lord-Phoenician, it is my honour to welcome you to Nova-Basilos. I am Chancellor Corynth of the Continental Government of Chalkedon-et-Byzas, and I extend to you the hospitality of the Gubernatorial Throne, and all the protections and rights thereof.' He straightened, a weak grin on his face. 'Though, having now seen you up close, we might well dispense with the protections bit.'

Fulgrim smiled, and the chancellor blanched. He stumbled and Fulgrim steadied him easily. 'I happily welcome your protection, most honourable chancellor, and your hospitality both. I am Fulgrim, and I come bearing tidings of peace and prosperity.' His voice echoed across the platform like the rumble of soft thunder. He looked up, scanning the ranks of assembled dignitaries, fixing their faces in his mind.

'I come in the name of the Emperor of All Mankind, Lord of Terra and All Known Space, to welcome Byzas and all its peoples at last into the Imperium of Man. Long have we dreamed of this reunion. And much happiness may it bring us both.' He folded his hands over his chest and bowed slightly to the Hereditary Governor and his family.

As he straightened, the crowd began to cheer. The assembled nobility, on the other hand, looked anything but pleased. He noted the deepest frowns, filing them away for later consideration. The initial negotiations of any planetary compliance were the most important. In the next few days, the continental government would learn the new limits of its autonomy, as well as how much face it could expect to save during the necessary compliance ceremonies. This was often the time that revolts were conceived, as former power brokers found themselves suddenly bereft of influence and importance.

Fulgrim waved to the masses, never letting his smile slip. He was the face of the Imperium. Benevolent, welcoming, gentle.

On Chemos, treachery was just another weapon in the executive arsenal. Deals were made and broken as easily as breathing. The key, as with anything, was timing. From what he'd read, it was much the same here, though in a more ritualised form. Honour was a fluid concept here, as on

Chemos. An oath to a fool was no oath at all. The only true consequences were those you couldn't adapt to.

He hoped the governor and his people proved themselves adaptable But if not, he would show them the iron fist that hid beneath the velvet glove He would break Byzas to his will, one way or another.

The 28th Expedition would succeed.

And a renewed Third Legion would rise from the ashes of the old.

FOUR

The banquet hall of the gubernatorial palace was magnificent, in its way. Marble and gilt covered every surface Statues posed dramatically in rounded nooks, gesturing skywards, fig leaves tastefully arranged. Grand floor-to-ceiling windows occupied the far wall, iron framed with coloured glass set in obtuse, pictorial patterns. The floor was tiled in some pale, pinkish stone which did little to absorb the noise caused by many feet, but which easily bore the weight of a fully armoured Space Marine.

Tables of dark wood lined the length of the hall, groaning beneath the bounty of a world. Great platters of sauroid meat and iridescent fish jostled for space with piles of spongy fruit and immense decanters of wine. Servants clad in fashionably plain tunics moved silently through the crowd, seeing to the needs of their betters. Men and women, the great and good of Byzas, clad in colourful robes or ceremonial uniforms, mingled in polite celebration, the murmur of their conversation a steady susurration that filled the hall.

The first families of Byzas were known collectively as the *Patrikoi* - the Thousand Patricians. The name was more symbolic than anything. He doubted there were a thousand of them these days. Too much war and political infighting had thinned the herd. Weaker families had been absorbed or destroyed by the stronger. But those who remained were strong indeed, and had dug themselves deeply into the workings of the continental government and Byzas.

The patricians controlled most, if not all, of the planet's infrastructure. The high-yield farms in the lowlands, the ore harvesting facilities in the mountains, even the roads that stretched from Nova-Basilos connecting it to the other, smaller cities. Every decision Hereditary Governor Pandion made likely required the agreement of one or more of the families. And even those efforts were probably stymied by other families, seeking their own advantage. It was a clumsy, creaking caricature of a functioning society, somehow still stumbling along. But not for much longer.

Pops of noise caught Fulgrim's attention. Through the window, he saw bursts of fiery colour staining the sky. Fireworks. In their glow, he saw bulbous shapes cutting slowly through the firmament. Airships were a

common sight here, used mostly for haulage or military transport. He'd been told that some of them could reach sub-orbital altitudes, if their etheric engines held up.

The anti-gravity engines were old technology - ancient, even by the standards of the Imperium. The Byzans kept them running more through luck and determination than any true understanding of how they worked. It was impressive, given the planet's otherwise haphazard technological advancement and the somewhat erratic atmospheric conditions. A civilised method of travel.

'There is something stately about them, don't you agree?' asked Chancellor Corynth.

Fulgrim glanced down at him. 'They are not without their charms.'

'We could arrange an aerial tour of the western provinces, if you like. I'm told it's quite beautiful, from the right height.'

'And from the ground?'

Corynth looked away. 'Less so.'

Fulgrim nodded in understanding. The western provinces had once been the tertiary continental government. After the destruction of the southern state, the west had capitulated to a more conventional military conquest. It was, for all intents and purposes, a slave state, divided up into private fiefdoms by the patricians. Reduced to poverty, its entire infrastructure bent towards the purposes of its conquerors. An unpleasant situation, and one that would have to change, eventually.

'This display is impressive,' he said, changing the subject.

'No expense has been spared, I assure you. Whole villages in the agri-circle are going hungry tonight to provide us with this repast.' Corynth seemed determined to count the cost of things. Fulgrim had judged the chancellor an idealist from the first, and was glad to see his suspicions confirmed. He'd always found idealists to be more useful than pragmatists.

'A sorry state of affairs.'

Corynth looked up at him. 'You almost sound as if you mean that, Lord-Phoenician.'

'Fulgrim. Phoenician is not a title, but a nickname, bestowed upon me by some unknown wit in my father's court - a remark on my panoply.' He tapped his armour, indicating the purple coloration. 'You may continue to refer to me as "lord" if you insist on formality.' Fulgrim glanced at him.

'And I do mean it. From what I've been told, the majority of this planet's population lives in poverty such that even the most wretched slum-dweller on Chemos - when there were slums on Chemos - would pity them.'

'Harsh words.' Corynth stared up at him, as if re-evaluating him. The soft music that permeated the banquet hall changed tempo, becoming more rousing. Space was cleared at the centre of the hall, and dancers clad in silks and beaten gold spun into view. The crowd applauded in appreciation of the entertainment to come.

'But true. The potential of this world has been stunted by war, privation and ignorance. I recognise the signs well enough, for I saw much the same as a child.'

Corynth blinked. 'A child?'

Fulgrim chuckled, watching the dancers cavort. 'Yes, chancellor, I too was once a child. An exceedingly precocious child, I admit, but a child nonetheless.' He gestured. 'A bit taller than average, perhaps.'

Corynth laughed. 'Belleros,' he said. 'If I am to call you Fulgrim, you must call me Belleros, please.'

'Belleros, then. It is good. Too much formality can make cooperation difficult.'

Corynth nodded. 'I agree. But formality serves a purpose.' He gestured to where the governor sat, chatting gaily with Pyke. 'It shields him from those who might otherwise see this as an opportunity to strike'

'I take that to mean that not all of your people agree with the coming change.'

Corynth frowned. 'No. Not if it means Pandion stays on his throne'

Fulgrim studied him, noting the slight flush to his cheeks, the faint heat behind his words and the sudden quickening of his pulse A mortal would not have been capable of detecting such things. 'Will that be an obstacle?'

Corynth peered at him. 'What do you mean?'

'Stability does not rest solely in the individual, but in the society. If stability can be maintained by removing an individual, then it is an option to be considered.'

'You'd kill him.'

Fulgrim shrugged. 'Or exile. A bloodless coup is achievable, even by my limited forces. He and his heirs could be easily removed from consideration.' He spotted Abdemon, looking uncomfortable near the

windows. He and the others had come in their war-plate, as Fulgrim had. The better to reinforce the obvious point. They loomed over the other guests, even as they sought to put them at their ease. Well, except for Fabius, who lurked near the far wall. The Apothecary studied the crowd as if preparing to dissect them.

The others seemed to be handling things with more aplomb. Telmar had cornered some unlucky nobleman and was being politely menacing. Quin was studying the banquet table in obvious confusion, a tiny plate clutched gingerly in his massive hands. Alkenex and Thorn mingled silently, observing rather than participating. He heard the boom of Cyrius' laughter, and an appreciative titter from the small crowd he'd gathered about him.

After long moments of silence, Corynth swallowed thickly. 'I thought you came to help him.' The re-evaluation continued. Fulgrim could see the man's internal calculations becoming more complex. Fulgrim was neither the largest of his brothers, nor the most intimidating. He was beautiful and graceful, and those things put the human mind at ease. All but the most wary quickly forgot that he was a primarch, and not simply exceedingly tall.

'I came to bring Byzas into compliance I would prefer to do so as efficiently as possible.' Fulgrim watched the dancers glide gracefully across the floor. Part of him longed to join them. But not now. Not today. 'It does not matter to me who rules, only that they rule in the Emperor's name.'

Corynth looked away. 'Our people have no say, then?'

'Which people? Those starving villagers you mentioned? Or the patricians, who, in their ceaseless politicking, have brought your world to the edge of ruin?'

'Both. All men are the sum of Byzas, and Byzas is the sum of all men.'

Fulgrim looked at him. 'You sound like a philosopher.'

'One has to be, in order to maintain equilibrium here. Reality is a thing of competing disparities. Parsing them requires a certain fluidity of thought.'

Fulgrim chuckled. He'd often thought much the same about his time in the Palace on Terra. Every word he'd spoken was analysed and dissected by a thousand competing factions, each of them seeking their own advantage. 'Compliance requires stability. I would prefer to leave Byzas in better shape than I found it.'

'Meaning?'

Fulgrim gestured, pleased. It was the opening he'd been waiting for.

'Improved living and working conditions for the rural population. A lessening of the stranglehold the patricians have on the high-yield industrial farms of the Chalkedonian Lowlands and the ore-processing centres in the Anabas Hills. They will still control manufacture of raw material, but have less influence on how it is employed. We will begin a series of reforms designed to strengthen the continental government, so that it is no longer completely beholden to an archaic caste system designed solely to prop up a few inbred neo-barb clans.'

Fulgrim made no effort to speak quietly. There were ears listening and he wished for them to hear everything clearly. Obfuscation would only slow compliance. Better to provoke the foolish into action as swiftly as possible.

Corynth looked as if he were choking on something. 'Y-you can't! That's... How?' he spluttered, forcing the words out in a tangled rush.

'Compliance is not solely about forcing worlds to surrender the sovereignty, Belleros. It is also about bringing them enlightenment. It is about showing them - showing you - that there is a better way. And that is what I intend to do. My question to you, Belleros, is, will you help me?'

The chancellor stared up at him. He shook his head. 'I don't... I-' He was saved from answering by the sudden arrival of Pyke and the Hereditary Governor.

'My lord, you are avoiding your duties,' the Primary Iterator chided. 'A guest must greet his host. It's only polite.'

Fulgrim nodded. 'So it is. I have been most remiss, Hereditary Governor Pandion. My most profuse apologies.' As he bowed to Pandion, he glimpsed Pyke hooking Corynth's arm and deftly leading him away. Fulgrim liked the man, and hoped that he wouldn't prove to be an obstacle.

Fulgrim studied the Hereditary Governor. Pandion IV had been a big man, once. But that mass had shrunken tight against his bones, and his flesh hung loosely on him in places. His robes of state had been cut for a larger man, and they now enveloped him like a shroud. Fulgrim could smell sickness on him, beneath the layers of incense. Despite his obvious illness, the governor seemed more at ease than he had earlier.

'Quite a party, isn't it?' he asked, his voice a thin whisper.

'I was just commenting as much to Chancellor Corynth,' Fulgrim said. He took a proffered wine glass from a servant's tray. He paused as he raised it to his lips, spotting an out-of-place expression in the crowd. Anger, quickly

masked by amiability.

'They're scared of you,' Pandion went on.

'Are they?' Fulgrim continued his observation of the crowd. A turbulent knot of conflicting emotions. Fear, anger, anticipation. Pyke's junior iterators mingled freely, conducting subtle interviews with those parties they'd marked as useful. Later, Pyke would approach those individuals herself, and begin the private negotiations that laid the foundation for any compliance.

The governor smiled. 'Pleases me to no end, honestly. It's about time something frightened them. They've grown arrogant in their complacency.'

'I am glad to be of service,' Fulgrim said, with a slight bow.

Pandion chuckled. 'You've come at the right time. They were just about to become unbearable. And I'd like to enjoy my remaining years in something akin to peace.'

Fulgrim nodded, listening with half an ear. He scanned the crowd, parsing body language, until he'd isolated a dozen individuals. They were ill at ease, but attempting to appear casual. All were moving, drawing closer to the governor, using the crowd as cover while they moved into position.

Assassins. Their attempts at subtlety only rendered them more obvious to his eyes. Amateurs, then. He sipped his wine and blinked. 'Well, that is unfortunate'

'What?' Pandion goggled at him.

'Someone just tried to poison me. How unexpectedly rude.' He signalled surreptitiously to Cyrius.

'I'll alert the guards at once.' Pandion began. Fulgrim dropped a steadying hand on his shoulder. The governor nearly buckled beneath the sudden weight 'No. I believe a demonstration is in order. Act as if nothing is wrong.'

'But-'

'I have suffered an insult, Hereditary Governor. I beg your leave to solve it in my own fashion.' He glanced at Abdemon. One look was enough to alert the lord commander to the situation. Abdemon stiffened and began to make his way towards Fulgrim. As he did so, the others followed suit, one by one, breaking off conversations in mid-word.

They cleared pathways through the crowd, moving without hurry, waiting for their primarch's signal, trusting in him to guide their actions. Such

discipline had served the Legion well, on countless worlds.

Fulgrim hoped today would not be the first day it failed to prove its worth.

'This is foolishness,' Lord Commander Frazer muttered. The welcome gala was in full swing. The attendees were limited to the Imperial representatives and those members of the patricians who had been invited by the Hereditary Governor, or had otherwise bribed, begged or bullied their way into the mix.

Pyke ignored Frazer's grousing. Instead, she watched her subordinates mingle. Every so often, one of the junior iterators would glance back her. She would gesture, or not, signalling them to continue the conversation they had started, or break it off. Compliance often started with a foundation of subtle influence. Bribery mostly, but occasionally veiled - or not so veiled - threats. Overwhelming military force was good for making a point during negotiations, but other methods were required to create something lasting.

'Foolishness,' Frazer said again. More loudly this time, drawing disapproving looks from those closest to them.

Pyke sighed. 'Enlighten me, Herodotus. Which foolishness are you referring to?'

This.' Frazer gestured. We should be bringing them enlightenment. Not celebrating.'

'We are doing both. Or do you prefer bloodier methods of ensuring compliance?'

'Compliance means compliance,' Frazer grunted, glaring about him. He was a handsome man, with the hawk-like mien and supercilious air the Europan aristocracies bred for. He wore the crimson and silver of his regiment, one thin hand draped over the basket hilt of his dress sabre. His fingers tap-tapped a martial rhythm on the silver guard.

His junior officers were scattered throughout the crowd, doing their bit to bring honour to the regiment. They spoke with their opposite numbers, taking pains to quietly emphasise the inevitable result of any serious resistance by local military commanders. Pyke had great confidence in their ability to be threatening.

The Archite Palatines were a blooded regiment, drawn mostly from the military households of Europa. They had participated in the Antarctic Clearance, among other campaigns, and won the right to wear the aquila on

their silver cuirasses for their heroism during the Selenite Purge. The Palatines had fought alongside several Legions in their storied history, but had found their match in the Third. Aristocrats were only truly comfortable among others of their kind.

She wondered what Frazer and his ilk thought of Fulgrim's programme of inducting common-born Chemosians into the Legion. Then, they were probably willing to look the other way, bar a few mutterings. Even the most illustrious bloodline needed an infusion from hardy peasant stock every century or so, after all.

Frazer's hostility towards Byzas and its people was no mystery, at least. The noble families of Terra saw the potentates and dynastic clans of the frontier worlds as usurpers and upstarts. What worth was there to a bloodline only a few thousand years old? The aristocracies of Terra barely acknowledged each other as peers. Fruits grown in foreign soil weren't even to be considered.

'These people are primitives,' Frazer continued, warming to his subject. 'Fit only for the lash or the plough. What use is a planet that's already half turned to glass, because its inhabitants are too stupid to resist lobbing atomic weapons at one another?'

'Shades of Old Night, I dare say, Herodotus.' Pyke sipped the wine, noting the traces of at least three different toxins. She frowned and glanced at Frazer. 'Don't drink the wine.'

'What? Why?'

'It's poisoned,' Cyrius said, as he joined them. The Space Marine had a glass in his hand. It looked tiny, like a child's toy. He studied Pyke. 'I'm surprised you noticed.'

'The benefits of a cultured palate.' Pyke held her glass up. 'It's starting a bit earlier than I expected. Someone is impatient.' Assassination attempts were an inevitable part of the diplomatic process. Usually, they occurred later, when the local powerbrokers became fully cognizant of what compliance meant.

Cyrius blinked. 'You expected this?'

'Treachery,' Frazer said. His hand groped towards the hilt of his sabre. Knowing him as she did, Pyke suspected the blade was fully functional, rather than simply ceremonial. Duelling came as easily to the officers of the Palatines as it did to the warriors of the Third - one of the reasons the two

worked so well together.

'Yes, and yes.' Pyke laid a restraining hand on his arm. 'We are in dangerous waters and the fish are biting. Has Fulgrim noticed yet?'

'Noticed what?' Frazer demanded, as Cyrius nodded.

'He has. He sent me to see to your safety. Quin and the others will deal with the assassins.' He smiled politely. We expected this as well.'

Frazer looked around. 'Assassins?'

'Ten of them,' Pyke said. She had noticed them earlier, but assumed they were there for some unlucky member of the patricians. Murder was endemic among the upper classes here, whether through duelling or assassination. The aristocracy of Byzas was a glorified pit of vipers.

'Twelve, actually,' Cyrius murmured, ushering them off of the floor. The crowd parted easily before him. Pyke smiled and patted his forearm.

'My eyes aren't what they used to be, I'm afraid.'

Fulgrim watched the assassins draw closer and fought to conceal his growing amusement. His first impression had been correct. These were amateurs. Revolutionaries, possibly. Or simply ambitious nobles, looking to stage a public coup. Perhaps they wanted to halt the compliance negotiations. Their reasons would become clear in time.

They had hesitated, when they realised the poison in his drink had had no effect. But they had found their courage quickly enough. There was no faulting the people of this world in that regard. It spoke well as to their future in the Imperium.

The other guests had at last realised that something untoward was occurring in their midst. The atavistic instinct for incipient violence, which all humans possessed, took hold. The dancers and servants melted away into the crowd. The raised voices of the gentry faltered and fell silent. It all happened in a matter of seconds.

For Fulgrim, whose perceptions were far beyond mortal, it was an eternity, in which to prepare for what came next.

The closest assassin stepped into the open, eyes wide, smelling of fear and excitement. From beneath his robes, he drew a small, low-velocity stub pistol of ornate manufacture. A prized heirloom, no doubt. This was not simply a murder, but a statement. Fulgrim focused on the weapon, calculating the range and probable trajectory in seconds. The ammunition

cylinder clicked, sounding like thunder to his ears.

Everything slowed down, as Fulgrim sped up. The flash from the weapon's muzzle expanded like a firework. The roar of the crowd pulsed like the voice of the ocean. The slug erupted, moving faster than the human eye could follow.

Fulgrim's hand snapped out, intercepting the projectile before it could reach Pandion. The lead slug punched into his armoured palm at high velocity, and the banquet hall echoed with the impact. Pandion stumbled back, mouth working soundlessly. Silence fell, as all eyes became fixed on the primarch. Fulgrim retracted his hand and dropped the smoking slug into his wine glass. 'Well, now the party is officially ruined,' he said.

For a moment, the tableau held. Then a second shot glanced off his armour, as the assassins recovered their nerve. Screams rose from the guests and people surged back and forth, or scattered for the exits. More shots came as Fulgrim turned, blocking the cowering Pandion from sight. The slugs struck his back, flattening themselves against his armour. 'Rest easy, Hereditary Governor. No harm shall befall you.' He turned his head slightly. Panic had thinned the crowd some, as he'd hoped. The assassins had lost the element of surprise. 'Warriors of the Third - glory to His name, death to His foes!'

The signal given, his gene-sons went to work. They'd homed in on the assassins with lethal patience From the corner of his eye he saw Kasperos punch a hapless gunman in the back, nearly folding the man in half. Quin trudged towards another, soaking up a fusillade of shots. When he got dose, he caught the assassin's hand in an unyielding grip, crumpling weapon and limb both. An almost gentle slap spun the screaming man's head around on his neck, silencing him.

'Curb your enthusiasm, my sons, I want one alive,' Fulgrim called out. He caught sight of Corynth crawling towards him, using tables and statues for cover, a look of determination on his face. He froze when he realised Fulgrim was watching him.

'The governor - is he...?' the chancellor said.

Fulgrim looked down. Pandion was a bit glassy-eyed from shock, but otherwise unharmed. And he wasn't panicking, like most of his courtiers. The old man had some steel in him, buried deep. 'He yet lives.'

'I've never seen anyone move that fast,' Corynth said, staring at him.

'I am one of the Emperor's sons,' Fulgrim said simply. He turned, scanning the room. It had gone quiet, save for the moans of those trampled in the mass exodus. The assassins were dead, except one, who was only mostly dead. Fabius held the slumped form of what looked to be a continental army officer by his ornate golden gorget. One of the chirurgeon's syringe-limbs had jabbed itself into the unfortunate man's spine.

'Paralytic,' Fabius said simply, at Fulgrim's questioning look. The Apothecary hefted the limp shape onto his shoulder with ease.

'Trust the Spider to use his venom,' Thorn said. Fabius glanced at him, but said nothing. Fulgrim shot Thorn a warning look. The warrior bowed his head and fell silent.

Abdemon signalled him. 'My lord, I've accessed the palace vox-feed. It appears they had an escape plan ready, in case they succeeded. A small airship is departing the palace aerodrome, ignoring all attempts to call it back. Should we...?'

Fulgrim stretched. 'No. I shall handle this. You stay with the governor.' He started towards the nearest window, pulling on his helmet as he went. As the seals clicked into place, he patched into the palace vox and sensor feeds. They were primitive, but useful. He swiftly triangulated the quickest route to the palace aerodrome. When he hit the windows, he did so with some regret. He would commission new ones from the Legion's artisans, by way of apology. He dropped to the ground and was moving before the sound of the breaking glass reached his ears.

Shouts and alarms accompanied him as he raced towards the aerodrome. The gubernatorial palace was a circular labyrinth of columned walkways and jutting balconies. The aerodrome lay at the heart of the maze, within the vast glass bio-dome that served as the palace gardens. Fulgrim saw scattered groups of soldiers in government livery moving in the same direction, and increased his speed. He dropped from balcony to walkway, never slowing. He could run for hours without pause if need be, even in full armour.

When he reached the outer shell of the bio-dome, he did not head for one of the dozen ornately wrought bronze entryways. Instead, he leapt onto the hardened glass of the outer shell and began to scale it with preternatural agility. The glass was divided into sections and set into a massive, reinforced frame. Fulgrim ascended, following the curve towards the

summit. There would be an opening there, directly above the aerodrome. If the airship were looking to flee, it would have to pass through the top of the dome.

As he climbed, Fulgrim calculated probable speeds and angles of ascent. His timing would need to be perfect. The slightest mistake would result in embarrassment - or worse, injury. His heart sped up with anticipation. The glass of the dome cracked beneath his weight, and the frame bent in his grip as he forced himself higher. Through the glass, he saw the manicured expanse of green within, wild groves of native trees bisected by meticulously arranged pathways, lined by clumps of colourful flora chosen and placed for effect. All very tidy, if lacking in true artistry. Precision taken to excess.

The glass trembled slightly beneath him as he ascended. He could see the rounded roof of the aerodrome, rising above the treeline. There was no runway or landing platform. The etheric engines the airships used enabled vertical lift. The reverberations he felt were the result of the top of the aerodrome opening. The roof spread like the petals of a flower, revealing the hangar within, and the small fleet of gubernatorial airships.

As Fulgrim watched, one of the airships began to rise. He could hear the crackle of gunfire and the blare of alarms. Overhead, man-made lightning crackled in sheets as the palace's etherdomes were activated. The crude electrical fields theoretically protected the palace from airborne attack. Someone was obviously hoping the fields would also prevent the airship from escaping. He considered it unlikely, if escape was even what they were planning.

The airship rose towards the top of the bio-dome, carried aloft by anti-gravity engines more advanced than anything else on the planet. It was smaller than he'd expected. A pleasure-craft, rather than a vessel made for long-distance travel. It resembled one of the ancient galleys that had once prowled the Ionian Sea on Terra. Its prow resembled a hawk's beak, and sail-like fins jutted from either side of the hull, sweeping back to meet a sharply angled mast-like structure, which emitted a strange radiance.

That structure was the engine, though Fulgrim could not say how it worked. Control nodes and cogitator circuitry studded its length. Sections of it moved independently of the frame, rotating at alternating speeds. The air throbbed around it as it rose, and the glass of the bio-dome flexed and

trembled. Fulgrim reached the summit - an open, circular expanse, allowing for the free passage of airships - and picked up speed, running smoothly across the glass facets.

The airship reached the aperture and began to rise through it.

Fulgrim could feel the wash of the engine, and its energies played across him like soft lightning. He crouched, took a measured breath, and leapt. The airship rose and Fulgrim's fingers slammed into the hull. The vessel sagged slightly at the unexpected burden. Exterior weight sensors brayed in alarm.

Gilt buckled as he tore decorative plating aside with a wrench of his arm, revealing the bare metal beneath. He dug his armoured fingers into the metal, hooking the hull-panel. Feet braced, he began to peel the panel away from the frame. Rivets popped loose and ricocheted from his armour. He hurled the loose panel away and heard it crash through the glass below. The alarms were louder now. Gripping the empty frame one-handed, he drew *Fireblade* and, in the same motion, swept it up and across the substructure of the hull. The metal parted with a screech. Fulgrim rammed the blade into the gap and levered it open. Pressure hoses snapped, spewing their oily contents as he forced himself into the airship, shouldering aside the ravaged metal with inhuman strength.

He wondered how it looked to those unlucky enough to witness it - a giant, in alien panoply of amethyst and gold, smashing his way into their tiny vessel, accompanied by blaring alarms, cascading sparks and the howl of escaping air. Some of those in the compartment fled. Others, braver or simply suicidal, went for their weapons.

Targeting overlays whirred automatically, locking onto the nearest of the men. *Fireblade* hummed, neatly severing a hand at the wrist. The force of the blow sent the wounded man sprawling. Fulgrim turned, graceful and unhurried. His sword pinned a second man to a support strut, caving in his chest and turning his heart to slurry. Fulgrim left *Fireblade* there, trailing his fingers across the hilt.

'You may surrender now,' he said, arms crossed. There were three remaining. One had soiled himself. Two were reloading. He required at least one prisoner to make the exertion worthwhile. While they made up their minds, he took in the compartment at a glance. Sparking equipment, ruined by his sudden entrance. The shuddering of the deck beneath his feet hinted at its purpose - the controls for the etheric engine. And a single door,

beyond which metal stairs ascended. Smoke thickened the air, rising from the broken machinery. The men stared at him, their eyes watering from the fumes.

They wore the uniform of the gubernatorial army. Junior officers, by the pips and braiding. Had someone suborned the army? Or only its lower echelons? Fulgrim dismissed the thought. Answers would come later.

The airship shuddered convulsively. He could hear a high, thin whine echoing down from somewhere above. The engines were failing. The ship was going to crash, and they hadn't cleared the palace yet. The pilot's compartment would be somewhere above.

'Time's up,' he said. He caught hold of *Fireblade's* hilt and wrenched it free, allowing the body to slump to the deck. One of the officers went for his weapon, eyes wide. Fulgrim let *Fireblade* drift out, removing the man's head. A slug spanged off of the side of his helmet and he pivoted, bisecting the shooter with a single, sweeping blow. The third man ran.

Fulgrim followed.

The airship was in its death-throes. The vessel was more fragile than he'd assumed. The upper deck was enclosed in a glass canopy and composed of two levels. The etheric engine extended from the highest. A rounded pilot's dais occupied the lower. The pilot's throne was occupied by a thin, panicked man, clad in a sweat-stained uniform, who fought futilely with the ship's control wheel. He caught sight of Fulgrim rising from the lower deck and screamed.

Carbines barked in response. Fulgrim ignored them and strode towards the dais. His armour's sensors pinpointed five men, including the one he'd pursued up the stairs. He yanked the pilot from his throne. The man smelled of panic. He clawed for the pistol on his hip, and Fulgrim flung him aside, hard enough to break bones. He scanned the control wheel, grasping its function instantly. He caught hold of it and spun it precisely, calculating the angle of descent needed to avoid smashing into the edge of the bio-dome The airship groaned in response as it began to tilt. It was already losing altitude. Whatever damage he'd done was taking its toll.

'I estimate only a few moments before we land, in one piece or otherwise.' Fulgrim turned, scanning the faces of the men on deck, even as they continued to fire at him. Above them, the etheric engine was rattling ominously in its support frame. 'Surrender, and I'll spare your lives.'

They didn't. Fulgrim slid across the deck as it pitched, *Fireblade* singing out. His opponents had nowhere to go, and no hope of success. But they fought regardless, with the grim fanaticism of the doomed. In moments, only one remained.

Fulgrim advanced on him. The survivor backed away, pistol extended, arm trembling. Fulgrim lowered *Fireblade*. 'You'll be glad to hear that, by process of elimination, I have decided to spare you. Drop your weapon.'

The man's pale features tightened. He pressed the muzzle of his pistol to his head. 'Sabazius lives.' His finger twitched, quicker even than Fulgrim could reach him, and the pistol bucked. Fulgrim watched the body topple to the deck, and frowned.

'Well. That was disappointing.'

FIVE

Fulgrim stood atop a high balcony on the gubernatorial palace, letting himself sink into the ebb and flow of Nova-Basilos. Hands clasped behind his back, he listened to the noise rising from the tangled network of streets far below. The din was somewhat muffled by the omnipresent clouds of pollution which clustered about the lower levels of the palace.

Fulgrim's sensitive hearing could pick out the discordant sounds of industry - the cause of most of the pollution, he judged - and the crackling hum of the etherdomes that defended the palace from aerial assault. Last night's little escapade had proved that to be more theory than fact. He'd managed to guide the damaged vessel back to earth, but had otherwise failed to discover what its passengers had hoped to achieve - whether escape or some other, less obvious purpose.

He glanced upwards. Airships of intricate design, many marked with governmental insignia, drifted overhead, held aloft by their primitive etheric engines. They were larger than the craft he'd pursued, carrying troops to far-flung outposts, or bringing in territorial tithes. Some were merchant vessels, owned by one of the families that made up the patricians, while others were baroquely decorated private craft.

The palace occupied the heart of the city, sprawling in lackadaisical fashion. The remainder of Nova-Basilos was divided into districts of varying sizes. In the distance, occupying the horizon, he could make out a black line of massive defensive emplacements. The city had expanded past its original palisades, and then past the walls built to replace those. Now the emplacements marked its outermost districts.

Fulgrim studied the far-off guns, noting their size and crudity of manufacture. Pneumatic bombards and electric hypervelocity guns of the sort not seen on Terra since Old Night. There was even a battery of antique radium cannons, akin to those that lined the walls of the oldest holdfasts on Mars. The Mechanicum representatives he'd allowed to accompany him had already written extensive reports on the pseudo-archaic nature of the weaponry on display, as well as their effects on the surrounding landscape. Especially the area known as the Glass Waste, along the southern edge of Chalkedon.

He studied the strange aurora that rippled across the southern horizon - a permanent atmospheric disturbance. The aurora marked the tomb of the southern continental government. Once-fertile hills and plains scoured black by atomic fire, their inhabitants burnt to cinders, or reduced to barbaric tribalism in the ruins of their civilisation.

'Wine?' the governor said from behind him. His voice was reedy with age and illness. Fulgrim turned. He could still smell the cancer in the human, gnawing away at his vitality. He wondered if he ought to have Fabius look into it. It would be embarrassing if Pandion were to die before the compliance ceremonies.

The primarch accepted a delicately shaped glass, adequately filled with wine. He sniffed it politely, parsing the mild bouquet, before taking a sip. He grimaced at the unexpected bitterness.

'Indelicate, isn't it?' Pandion gave a thin smile. 'It always catches me by surprise. Has to do with radiation, I'm told. The vineyards of southern Chalkedon are on the edge of the Glass Waste. The grapes that grow there are ripe and plump to the eye, but there's a bitterness to them that only comes out when they're pressed. I quite like it, myself, but I admit that it might be something of an acquired taste.'

Fulgrim set the glass aside. 'It is good to have new experiences, if only to find out which ones weren't worth having in the first place.'

Pandion laughed. It was a harsh sound, part cough, part croak. 'What do you think of the Queen of Cities so far?' he asked. 'Have you ever seen its like before?'

'It is... quite impressive,' Fulgrim said politely. Nova-Basilos was pretty, in a provincial sort of way, though its beauty was nothing compared to Phoenicia. The capital of Chemos had withstood many of the ravages that afflicted the rest of the world, and under Fulgrim's guidance, it had ascended to heights undreamt of by its citizens.

Pandion's lips quirked. 'Once, I might've been insulted by such a response. But I know well enough that, for all our glory, we are but a backwater province of a far greater kingdom. And you are its prince.'

'One of them, at least.' Fulgrim smiled, pleased by the compliment. 'And Byzas is impressive, as far as backwaters go.'

Pandion chuckled. 'So we are taught.' He joined Fulgrim at the balcony rail and looked down at his city. He took a long swallow. 'We are taught many

things.' He turned, studying the strange lights that flickered above the Glass Waste. 'It's almost pretty, isn't it?' he said, somewhat wistfully. He gulped at his wine. 'You saved my life last night.'

Fulgrim smiled. 'It was my pleasure, and my duty, Hereditary Governor.'

'But more one than the other, I suspect.'

Fulgrim said nothing. Pandion grunted. 'It isn't the first time, obviously. He squinted. 'I don't remember the first time. I was a child, I think. Too young to understand why someone would want me dead.'

'And now?'

Pandion's smile was cold and hard. 'I know all too well.' He sighed. 'I am at once a symbol of decadence and an obstacle to pleasure.' He raised his glass, as if toasting the city. 'I am the cause of, and solution to, every problem afflicting this broken world.' He emptied his cup with an ease borne of too much experience. Fulgrim thought it was a wonder Pandion wasn't pickled, if he drank like that all of the time. The governor glanced at him.

'You're curious, aren't you? Hard to tell with that face of yours and that voice, but you wouldn't be here otherwise.' Pandion refilled his glass.

'Yes,' Fulgrim said. There was no point in hiding it. 'Few worlds so readily agree to compliance It was almost unseemly.'

Pandion laughed. 'Well, I'm desperate.'

Fulgrim raised an eyebrow. You admit it easily enough.' Pandion shrugged. 'I'm too old and too sick to play games. My world is dying a death of a thousand cuts. Little by little we lose what we were. Soon, we'll be no different from the irradiated barbarians roaming the Glass Waste.' He frowned and drained his glass. 'You should see them... Broken, pathetic things, riddled with tumours and waning over oases of tainted water. I won't have that as my legacy.'

'And you won't' Fulgrim said. 'Once you've formally agreed to compliance this world will become the responsibility of the Imperium. In time it will become a jewel in the firmament.'

'And more besides, eh?' Pandion peered at him. 'They tell me your man, the one with that... *device* attached to him, has been taking genetic samples from the children of the patricians. I am getting complaints. They are worried. They are wondering what he's looking for.' Pandion refilled his glass again.

'He is testing them for genetic compatibility.'

Pandion paused. 'Why?'

'My warriors are of noble stock, Hereditary Governor. And those stocks must be replenished. Part of compliance is the blood-tithe - firstborn sons, preferably. Though we will accept any who are compatible.'

Pandion paled. 'You mean hand over my - our - children?'

'I was under the impression that you had been appraised of the blood-tithe,' Fulgrim said softly. 'It is a high honour, I assure you.'

'I thought - I assumed they would be hostages. Not...' He trailed off, unwilling to meet Fulgrim's unyielding gaze 'An honour,' he finished flatly.

'The highest.' Fulgrim stepped back, hands spread. He was aware of the impact he made in his gilded panoply. He had come armoured for just that reason. Pandion must have no second thoughts. 'They will be as my own sons, raised high in the esteem of the Emperor, and bearing his crest.' He touched the aquila on his armour. 'They will see wonders and glories you cannot conceive of.'

'War, you mean.' Pandion sighed. 'We have seen much war here. Too much.' He looked up. 'The patricians are already on the verge of revolt. Half of them see me as weak, the other half see me as a tyrant. They're all spoiling for a war. That foolishness last night was but a taste of what is to come. And your arrival is the excuse they've all been looking for to embolden their followers.'

Fulgrim ignored the accusation. 'Who is Sabazius?'

Pandion grunted. 'No one.'

'Is he dead, then?'

'He was never alive. He's a folk tale. A story fools tell themselves when the world frightens them. A myth of progress.'

'An odd turn of phrase,' Fulgrim said.

'Accurate.' Pandion took a sloppy swallow. Wine dripped down his chin. 'Byzas does not progress, Lord Fulgrim. It regresses. We retreat from the future, back into tradition. It's just that no one can agree on what those traditions should be.' He laughed.

'That will change, soon enough.'

'I'm counting on it. I will bend knee to your Emperor, if he can keep me on my throne.' Pandion smiled. 'I'm too old to take up another career, don't you think? And my children, and their children, will make fine figureheads.

They're a pliant bunch. I made sure of it' He wiped his mouth with the back of his trembling hand. 'And the patricians want stability more than anything else.'

'Are you certain? They seem to be behind most, if not all, of your present difficulties.'

Pandion gestured dismissively. 'Some of them. Younger sons and penniless clans. Scrapers and scroungers, grabbing for any chance at advancement They'll fall into line, or they'll be destroyed.' He looked up. 'You did bring an army, didn't you?'

'No.'

Pandion choked on his wine. 'What?'

Fulgrim chuckled. 'There are forces in orbit, should the worst happen. But I intend to accomplish my task with a minimum of effort. The measure of a warrior is in the quality of his victory.'

'Quality? Are you insane?'

Fulgrim paused, and gave the governor a long, measured look. Pandion paled and stepped back. 'I meant no disrespect,' he said more quietly.

'Of course you did. Respect must be earned, and I've done precious little to do so.'

'You saved my life,' Pandion protested,

'Something any one of your guards could have done.' Fulgrim waved his further protests aside. 'No. You are correct. It does seem mad. But you said it yourself - Byzas is a much smaller part of a larger game. And the stakes I play for are greater than you can imagine. Primary Iterator Pyke mentioned that the compliance ceremonies will take place a month from now?'

Pandion nodded. 'On the anniversary of the continental government's founding.'

'Then in one month, this planet will be at peace.'

Pandion peered up at him. 'You're serious,' he said after a minute.

Fulgrim smiled. 'A month, Hereditary Governor Pandion. On my honour, as the commander of the Twenty-Eighth Expedition, and a son of the Emperor, I will bring this planet into compliance, in exactly one month.'

'He did *what*?' Pyke sat up so quickly that something popped. She winced and leaned back. 'Is he insane?' she demanded, her shout startling the birds in the branches above. She reclined on a divan in the palace gardens,

surrounded by her scribes and assassins. Fulgrim, as usual, was nowhere to be seen. The primarch seemed content to leave her to her work without hovering over her shoulder, unlike some of his brothers. She suspected that had less to do with confidence in her abilities, and more to do with boredom.

'The Hereditary Governor raised the same question,' Chancellor Corynth said, smiling in amusement. 'Are all of these... primarchs so confident?' He sat on a bench across from her, doing his level best to ignore her bodyguards.

'Fulgrim's response is actually quite measured compared to some,' Pyke said, glancing at Abdemon. The lord commander stood nearby, face like stone, but with a twinkle in his eye that let her know he was in good humour. Trust a Space Marine to see something funny in a situation like this. 'Others would have drowned the streets in blood at the first sign of resistance.'

'We did consider it,' Abdemon said without smiling.

'There are only six of you,' Corynth said pointedly.

'Eight,' Pyke corrected. 'Counting the lord commander here, and Lord Fulgrim. In any event, three of them would be enough to shatter the gubernatorial forces in a stand-up fight, from what I've seen.'

Corynth made to protest, thought better of it, and nodded, if grudgingly. Cyrius and the others had been busy making themselves visible since their arrival. They were currently touring the gubernatorial barracks, asking pointed questions and looming impressively. 'It's not them you have to worry about, at any rate'

'The patricians,' Abdemon said.

Corynth nodded. 'There is talk of resistance in the hinterlands. The farther you get from Nova-Basilos, the less they pay even lip service to the Gubernatorial Throne. Worse, it's not just the nobility.' Pyke eyes closed, massaged her temples. 'The peasants are revolting.' Abdemon looked at her. 'What?'

'Old joke. Forgive me. Do go on, Chancellor.'

Corynth frowned but continued. There have been disturbances in the agri-circle as well as the ore processing facilities in the mountains. Civil unrest in the western provinces. The gubernatorial army is doing what it can, but its resources are stretched thin.' 'What sort of disturbances?' Pyke asked.

Corynth looked uncomfortable 'Riots. Protests. Some noble families wield the lash more freely than they ought on their lands. As long as they pay their tithes, Pandion doesn't care. But the people grow restless.'

Pyke glanced at Abdemon. His face might as well have been a mask. 'How restless?' she asked. 'An uprising?'

Corynth said nothing. His silence was answer enough. Pyke felt a headache coming on. 'I'm going to need more wine,' she muttered.

'We require all available information on these matters,' Abdemon said. 'Every record, every report. The more data we have; the more quickly we can formulate an appropriate response' He looked down at Corynth. 'Are you willing to provide us with this?'

Corynth looked startled. He nodded. 'Everything I have is at your disposal'

Abdemon smiled. That's what I like to hear?

'When is Pandion making the announcement?' Pyke asked. 'How much time do we have before the whole planet knows why we're here?'

'Not much, I'm afraid. He wishes to make the announcement about the compliance ceremonies tomorrow. And Lord Fulgrim agrees.'

'Of course he does,' Pyke grumbled. 'Why make this easy, after all?' She sagged back. 'One month from tomorrow, then. I suppose we'd best get to work.'

When the chancellor had departed, Abdemon turned to her. 'Thoughts?'

'Fulgrim has made an error,' she said. She met Abdemon's frown head on. 'He has,' she insisted. 'If the situation is half as unsettled as it sounds, it's going to take more than a month to sort out And more than six of the Emperor's own.'

'Eight,' Abdemon corrected.

Pyke waved the interjection aside. 'Two more or less will make little difference, even if one of them is Fulgrim. We can't fight a planet.'

'Then it's a good thing we're not planning on it,' Abdemon said. 'At the moment, little of the anger here is directed at us. It's an internal matter.'

'That will change after tomorrow.'

Abdemon nodded. 'By then, the Phoenician will have come up with a suitable plan of action.'

Pyke eyed him. 'You have that much faith in him?'

'Don't you?'

Pyke sat back. ‘I'm too old to have much faith in anything besides myself.'

She tapped her lips with a finger, considering. An iterator was well-schooled in the mathematics of chance. Compliance was never a certain thing no matter how it might look from outside the process. There were always obstacles to the process, and now Fulgrim had added one more - a time limit.

Then, what was it to her if the deadline passed before things were settled? In fact, it might be better for all concerned if Fulgrim were taught the consequences of hubris as soon as possible. A dose of reality, to puncture that perfectionist bubble of his.

'But... what if?

She looked at Abdemon. 'Is it possible?'

Abdemon shrugged. 'Anything is possible.' He held up a hand, staying her reply. There are two possibilities. The first is that tomorrow's announcement stifles any thoughts of revolution. The patricians will be too busy trying to maintain their influence to plan a hopeless war.'

'And the second?'

'That the announcement will provoke them into action.' Abdemon frowned. 'The Phoenician is counting on the latter, I suspect. Easier to deal with them if they reveal themselves.' He paused. 'He takes the assassination attempt personally, you know. Someone tried to kill the senior members of the delegation last night, and he sees it as a stain on his honour.' His frown deepened. That they thought they could get away with it is an insult to the honour of the Third.'

Pyke sighed. 'Rest assured, that insult has been repaid.' She'd seen to it herself. Not an hour after Fulgrim's capture of the airship, she'd already had the names of those involved in the poisoning attempt. Some, she would have disposed of quietly. Others, she would suborn, and make use of what they knew. It was always useful to have spies in place. One never knew when they might come in handy.

Nova-Basilos was riddled with conspirators of one sort or another. The palace was swarming with plotters, each of them with their own agenda. Most were inconsequential, as far as the 28th Expedition's mission was concerned. But some bore watching. And, if necessary, excision from the body politic. 'Where is Fulgrim now?' she asked. 'If I am to perform my function to the best of my ability, I must know what this plan of his is.'

Abdemon hesitated. 'He has gone to see Apothecary Fabius.' His grimace

as he uttered the Apothecary's name spoke volumes. Fabius had been given quarters in the lower levels of the palace, well away from anyone who might be disturbed by whatever he was up to. Something Pyke was growing increasingly thankful for.

Pyke shivered. 'I will speak to him later, then.'

Abdemon nodded gravely. 'A wise choice.' He sighed. 'Six against an entire world. Some might call that hubris.'

'Eight,' Pyke said.

'Nine, actually.' Abdemon smiled. 'If we're counting you.'

Pyke laughed. 'How can we lose?'

The lower levels of the gubernatorial palace were clean, high corridors of plain stone, lit by sodium lanterns. Teams of warders, clad in dark uniforms, patrolled these corridors. Their hands never strayed far from their sidearms or the reinforced batons that, when called upon, they wielded with vigour.

Fulgrim wasn't challenged in his descent. Whether that was due to the governor's orders, or to simple fear, the primarch didn't know. That they stayed out of his way was enough. As he moved through the cramped corridors, he tried to ignore the sounds coming from the cells. There weren't many prisoners - most lawbreakers in Nova-Basilos were subject to lunar transportation, or hard labour in the agri-cirde. But some were considered too dangerous to be transported. They were rabble-rousers of one sort or another. Agitators and dissidents, looking to overturn the natural order, as the continental government saw it.

There had been similar movements on Chemos during his rise. The Callax worker protests and the harsh, often brutal responses of the executive clans. He remembered clouds of stinging gas rolling through cramped streets, and the crackle of the Caretakers' shock-batons as they met flesh. Unconsciously, his hands curled into fists.

He felt again the dull ache of a shock-baton slapping into his palm, and the look on its wielder's face as he crushed it. The searing sensation of gas filling his lungs and burning his eyes as he fought his way free of the press of panicked humanity. Tullea had almost died that day, and Fulgrim had lost his temper for the first time. But not the last.

Things had been simpler then. Right and wrong were obvious, and his enemies easier to identify. But he'd been a child and had seen the world

with a child's eyes. As he grew older, he'd come to realise that the world was a complex machine - full of moving parts, each with its own function, and prone to breaking down. Concepts like right and wrong gave way to efficiency and necessity, as he delved into the inner workings of the machine. A broken cog might squeal as it was stripped loose, but it had to be replaced for the good of the whole mechanism. He knew this with unshakeable certainty.

Even so, there was a small part of him that still saw value in the broken cog. Purpose was defined by the craftsman, not by the mechanism. With patience and care, enough broken cogs might become something beautiful.

Fulgrim forced himself to relax as he entered Fabius' lair. The Apothecary had secluded himself away from the others, much to Fulgrim's disappointment. Fabius seemed determined to make himself a nuisance. But even a nuisance had its uses.

The rooms had been turned into an approximation of Fabius' apothecarium on board the *Pride of the Emperor.* Equipment had been sent down from the ship and lay scattered in various states of unpacking. Generators hummed softly, casting striated shadows across the pale walls. Fabius had collected several hundred genetic samples since their arrival, and the tiny tubes of blood and plasma sat in their stand on a table, awaiting further study. Fulgrim was unable to resist peering at the samples, hoping to see some sign - any sign - of the potential they might hold.

Sadly, whatever secrets they held, they did not reveal to him.

A muffled groan drew his attention to the centre of the room, where an examination table had been set up. On it lay the prisoner they'd taken at the banquet. Fabius stood over him, arms red to the elbow. That the prisoner was still alive was no surprise. Humans were surprisingly hardy, for all their fragility.

'What have you learned from him?' Fulgrim asked softly. He didn't bother to greet the Apothecary. He'd come to discover that such niceties were lost on Fabius. Another sign of his increasing isolation from his brothers.

Fabius didn't turn. 'Little you did not already suspect. Factionalism is rife There are currently twelve primary claimants for the gubernatorial throne, and at least three more lesser claimants with significant support.'

'I'm surprised they weren't tripping over one another.' Fulgrim felt a twinge of annoyance. Pandion had said nothing about other claimants to the throne.

That added an element of uncertainty to what had seemed an otherwise straightforward matter.

Fabius glanced at him. 'They were. There were ten different toxins in the wine served to us last night. Four of them were non-fatal. The rest were meant to kill us. The doses all originated from different sources.'

'Sloppy,' Fulgrim murmured. The sheer, farcical chaos of such proceedings would have been amusing had he not been the one who was going to have to deal with it. 'Unsurprising I suppose, given their numbers.'

'It is not even simply the clans.' Fabius set aside his tools and turned. 'There are factions within factions, and organisations owing no allegiance to the old aristocracies. These people have turned treachery into a... a hobby. An art. Their schemes are built across generations, growing more complex with every decade, and ever less likely to come to fruition.'

Fulgrim restrained a smile. He had never seen the Apothecary look so incensed. 'Plotting for its own sake,' he said.

Fabius nodded tersely. 'Madness.'

'Cultural ennui,' Fulgrim corrected. They have become locked into a malfunctioning system, unable to escape its pull. We shall correct the system and simplify it in the process.' He studied the body on the slab. The man's eyes were wide, but empty of any spark of awareness. His chest had been cracked open, exposing what lay within in all its crimson glory. His heart still thumped and the surrounding tissue was wet with life, thanks to Fabius' skill. His veins had been extracted from his arms and legs, and were spread out across the sides of the table, unbroken, still dark with blood. In places, the meat had been scraped back, exposing the bone, and it was clear that Fabius had been taking marrow samples.

Fulgrim glanced at Fabius, wondering if he'd made the correct choice in bringing the Spider out of his web. Fabius met his gaze without flinching. Whatever he'd done, the Apothecary felt no guilt for it. Fulgrim gestured. 'Dispose of that at the soonest opportunity.'

Fabius bowed his head. 'First, I need to analyse native physiology, and test its suitability for gene-implantation.' He glanced at the body on the slab. 'I have already made some headway in that regard. The prognosis is tentatively positive.'

Fulgrim nodded. 'Do what you must, but quietly.'

'Quiet as a spider,' Fabius said as he turned back to his work. Fulgrim

frowned, but didn't rebuke him. Instead, he left the Apothecary to it.

Fabius, of all of them, knew exactly what was required of him.

SIX

The Gubernatorial Throne was less impressive than Fulgrim had hoped.

It was a sturdy seat, hooked into a barely functioning pneumatic lift, which wheezed alarmingly as it raised Pandion above his court. The throne's dais was set beneath a massive circular window of coloured glass. As the throne rose, it carried the governor into the light streaming in, so that he was limned by the sun. At least, in theory. In practice, Pandion was forced to lean to the side and squint to see anything. He was likely deaf as well as blind, given the noise the throne made.

The groaning cacophony of pumps and pulleys was drowned out by the choir of youthful castrati arrayed about the dais. Their high, soft voices smoothed over the mechanical complaints, and lent an air of regal dignity to an otherwise ridiculous process.

'Clever,' Fulgrim murmured, as he watched the spectacle play itself out. Pandion would loom over any supplicants or accusers who chose to make themselves known. Corynth stood below him, on the dais, surrounded by a ceremonial guard clad in heavy sky-blue armour, marked by the sunburst sigil of the Continental Government. 'It's almost as if he's removing himself from the line of fire.'

'That's exactly what he's doing,' Pyke said. She stood beside Fulgrim, waiting to be announced. 'Pandion is adept at taking himself out of consideration. He's made himself a virtual non-entity, and as a result, managed to just about hold onto what little authority he has.' She frowned. 'He's utterly venal, but he's smart.'

'Which is why we are here' Fulgrim looked around. The throne room was an amphitheatre, with raised benches to either side of the processional stretching from the doors to the foot of the throne. The curved lines of benches were occupied by senior members of the patricians, or their duly appointed representatives. Each of them was accompanied by a gaggle of scribes, guards and hangers-on, all of whom were in constant motion, running messages between the seated representatives. The level of noise was staggering - a solid rumble of voices, cutting across one another. Occasional scuffles between messengers - or the representatives themselves - only added to the din.

'It's a mystery to me how they get anything done,' Abdemon said from behind Fulgrim. He and Cyrius were acting as honour guard.

'They don't,' Pyke said simply.

'In that respect it's little different than any human government.' Fulgrim settled himself in for a long wait. Corynth had briefed him on how it would go. They would be announced last, after the assorted officers, merchants and tithe-collectors waiting for their moment with the governor.

The reasons for this were twofold. First, it was to disabuse any whispers that the Continental Government was no longer in control of Byzas. Second, Pandion hoped to lull the attending patricians into complacency, so that the announcement would pass without comment.

There was little hope of that, though. The patricians reminded him of the Chemosian executive clans. They scented blood, and they would never abide a new predator in their waters. In the days since their arrival, Pyke's iterators had fielded hundreds of missives, bearing the seals of an equal number of noble families. Protests, demands as to their intentions, and the occasional abject surrender.

The masters of this world did not yet truly understand their situation. But soon enough, they would. And when they did, some would become openly hostile. Fulgrim looked forward to it. A worthy challenge. Or an interesting diversion, at least.

When they were announced at last, Fulgrim took Pyke's hand and led her towards the throne at a stately pace. Unlike the others, they were not supplicants, and it would be unseemly to hurry. They had all the time in the world.

The patricians fell silent as they approached the throne, but only for a moment. Mutters swept the amphitheatre as men leaned forward. Some of them would have seen Fulgrim at the welcoming ceremony, or the banquet. But for most, this was their first glimpse of the primarch in the flesh.

'Like alley curs, growling over a bone,' Pyke whispered. Fulgrim fought to keep his amusement from his face.

'So long as they content themselves with growling, I am satisfied.' The ceremonial guards on the throne's dais stiffened at their approach, but didn't raise their weapons. He studied them, noting the laxity of discipline. Their sky-blue armour was more decorative than functional, and made from curved, overlapping plates of layered metal, resembling the carapace of an

insect. It had been covered in gilt and delicate etchings, depicting scenes of courtly life. Their weapons were antiques, even by the standards of Byzas, and equally ornamental. They might make for suitable clubs, but otherwise were of little threat.

'The Gubernatorial Guard,' Pyke murmured. 'Originally, the second-born sons of trusted noble families. Now, mostly whoever can afford to purchase a commission.'

'Numbers?'

'Five hundred, according to the muster rolls.'

'In actuality?'

'A hundred, perhaps two.' Pyke smiled. 'It’s still a well-regarded position, but more ceremonial in nature, these days. The patricians were uncomfortable with the governor having access to a dedicated core of professional soldiers, made up of their family members. Some among them would like to see it reduced even further - to a select few.'

'Chosen by them, no doubt'

'Of course,' Pyke said. 'Make no mistake. It's not simply greed. They've been eroding the throne's power for generations. Steadily chipping away at the only authority greater than theirs.'

'And all in vain,' Fulgrim said. They reached the throne a few moments later. Corynth descended to meet them, a somewhat strained smile on his face and a mobile voxcaster clutched in his hands like a staff. There were shouts from the gallery above as someone let their anger get the better of them. They fell silent a moment later, likely hushed up by their fellows. Fulgrim allowed himself a small smile. There were always a few who couldn't restrain themselves and stay in formation.

From above came Pandion's voice. The primitive voxcasters built into the throne hurled his voice outwards in fits and starts. We welcome before us the representatives of our brother from the stars,' Pandion began.

Fulgrim quirked an eyebrow. 'Brother?' he murmured, looking at Corynth.

The chancellor flushed. 'He's trying to keep face'

'Our brother has sent his son, to invite us to take part in a great endeavour... One that is as much our birthright as the stones of the Anabas Mountains,' Pandion continued. The noise from the benches swelled, softly at first, and then more loudly. Pandion raised his voice accordingly, fighting to be heard. We shall rejoin the great empire of humanity, and reclaim the

stars. We shall...'

His voice dissolved into crackling static as the voxcaster succumbed to age. Pandion slumped back into his throne, wiping his face A wave of static flowed down from the benches, as men raced to the voxcasters mounted along the rails dividing each section. They shouted over one another, each one fighting to be the first to condemn their sovereign lord's words.

Corynth gestured to the Gubernatorial Guard, and the men struck the dais with the stocks of their rifles. Once, twice. The noise didn't lessen. Fulgrim raised a finger. Abdemon drew his sword and turned it about. He caught the blade and drove the pommel down against the floor, cracking the tiles and the stone beneath. The sound echoed through the chamber, and the contentious squabbling from the gallery stuttered into silence. Corynth winced. 'That's going to be expensive to replace.'

Pandion took advantage of the lull. 'My brothers, do not despair. This is our destiny. We were not meant to grub in the soil, but to sail the stars. And our newfound kin have come to show us the way.' He gestured to Fulgrim.

'And why should we believe this... creature?' one of the noblemen asked, his voice echoing creakily through his voxcaster. 'He clearly isn't even human. For all we know, he's some dreg from the Glass Waste, clad in finery, set up to trick us.'

Fulgrim restrained a laugh as a rumble of agreement echoed from the benches. Pyke made to reply, but Fulgrim waved her back. He looked up at his accuser. 'To what end?'

The man blinked, startled by the sonorous resonance of Fulgrim's voice. Even without the voxcaster, his voice reached every ear in the chamber. Fulgrim continued before the man could recover. 'I have no need of tricks, my friend. I am a son of the Emperor of Mankind, and I could snuff out your world like - that - if I wished.' He snapped his fingers for emphasis. He heard a sudden intake of breath from Corynth.

A roar of protest swelled up. Fulgrim raised his hands, as if in welcome. He cast his smile into the teeth of their anger, revelling in their impotence. They had all seen the Stormbirds descend from on high, bristling with weaponry. Abdemon and Cyrius stood before them, flanking their primarch, resplendent in their baroque war-plate, their hands resting on their weapons. The proof of his statement was there, and even the dullest among them could not deny it.

'I would prefer peace,' Fulgrim called out, hands clasped before him. He held one out and made a fist. 'But I am fully articulate in the language of war.' He smiled beatifically. 'I can draw down fire from heaven and scorch your cities to glass, if I wish. But I do not wish. I do not wish to set my sons upon you. I do not wish to unleash Lord Commander Frazer's war-dogs upon your population.' He held up a finger, as if in warning. 'But I can. And I will. If necessary.'

He spread his hands. 'I beg you, gentles all, do not make it necessary. My brothers believe that it all comes down to fire and blood. They are world-breakers and shatterers of civilisations. Luckily for you, I am of a more diplomatic inclination. I would rather work with you. I would see you join the Imperium of Man as full citizens of our galactic brotherhood, not as broken menials.'

Fulgrim dropped his hands. 'But rest assured, you shall join us. You will be made compliant, one way or another.' He kept his voice even. Calm. It was not a threat, merely a statement of fact.

A rumble rose up. Men were on their feet, shouting to be heard through malfunctioning voxcasters. Messengers ran back and forth between the benches. Pandion hunched back in his throne as if the uproar pained him. And perhaps it did. The governor was well aware of how this must look to his guests. Fulgrim glanced at him, noting the grimace of ill-ease. 'He's worried,' he said.

'Good,' Pyke said. 'Let him worry. Let them all worry. It will make things easier. Fear is the strongest lever we have.' She spoke confidently. The noise levels dipped. Someone new had the floor.

Fulgrim studied the man. Whoever he was, he commanded the respect of the others.

'Patrician Bucepholos,' Pyke murmured. 'One of the leading lights of the vocal opposition. Old family. Old money.'

Fulgrim nodded. Bucepholos wore dark robes, which did little to obscure his bulk. A stylised hippocampus was picked out in white thread on the uppermost fold, and a smaller version was tattooed on one round cheek.

'If we are to believe you,' the heavy-set man began, 'then that implies that you come not in peace, but as conquerors. That if we do not submit to this farce, we will be crushed by these unseen armies at your command.' Muted laughter from the bolder of his fellows greeted these words. Not so much as

there might once have been. Not now that the possibility was backed up by evidence.

'That I stand before you now is proof enough of my peaceful intentions. I have no interest in conquering your world, Patrician Bucepholos. Only in seeing that it takes its proper place in the wider galaxy.'

If Bucepholos was surprised that Fulgrim knew who he was, he did a good job of hiding it. He frowned. 'And yet, you can understand our confusion, when you toss about such grandiose threats at your whim.'

'Not a whim, I assure you. Instead, a statement of fact.' He gave *Fireblade's* sheath a light slap. 'Like this sword, or the bolt pistols my sons wear holstered on their belts. A show of strength, so that we might treat with one another as equals.'

'But isn't the whole point of this display to show us that we are, in fact, not equals? That our esteemed governor wishes to sell us into slavery to a power we have little hope of resisting? You seek to frighten us, sir. Nothing more, nothing less.' Bucepholos stepped back, as his fellows began to shout and stamp their feet.

Fulgrim inclined his head, acknowledging the point. He waited until the noise died down and said, 'You are right. I seek to scare you. But not as a soldier seeks to scare his foe. Rather, I seek to frighten you as a parent might frighten their child - fear is a lesson, a temper to action. If you fear, you will not act rashly, or inadvisably.' He shrugged elegantly. 'Perhaps it was a mistake to do so. I freely admit that I am not immune to such things, for you see... I know fear as well.'

Silence greeted this admission, as Fulgrim had hoped. He stepped forward, hand over his heart. 'I fear that you will surrender to misplaced pride.' He held up his hand. 'I fear that you will slap aside my hand, offered in friendship.' He indicated *Fireblade.* 'I fear that I will be forced to draw this blade in anger. I fear that I will be forced to destroy what I desire only to save.' He swung a hand back, indicating Abdemon and Cyrius. 'I fear to unleash my sons, for their wrath, once stoked, is a fire which would surely claim this entire world. I fear all of these things, honourable patricians.'

Fulgrim turned, sweeping his gaze across the long benches. Few of them dared attempt to meet his eyes. He sank to one knee, head bowed, arms spread. A murmur ran through the benches. 'I beg you, my friends, do not let my fears be realised.' He looked up and brought his hands together, as if

in supplication. 'Let us cast aside fear together, noble sons of Byzas. Let us join our fates together, and journey as one into a glorious future.'

He rose gracefully and turned to the throne. He bowed deeply. 'With your permission, Hereditary Governor, I shall withdraw and await your decision.' Pandion nodded silently, his face a mask of conflicting emotion. Fulgrim turned towards the doors and took Pyke's hand once more.

'A touch melodramatic,' she said softly, as they proceeded away from the throne. 'But memorable. Stirring, even.'

Fulgrim smiled.

'Let us hope it does the trick.'

SEVEN

'A child?' Fulgrim asked.

He strode through the cramped and twisting streets of Nova-Basilos' inner district, accompanied by Chancellor Corynth and three of his sons. Kasperos Telmar and Grythan Thorn paced to either side of him, alert for any threat. Fabius followed at some distance. It had taken some prodding to get the Apothecary out of his lair. Fulgrim thought the easiest way of acclimatising the populace to the Emperor's Children - and vice versa - was to let them see and be seen in public, as much as possible. It was early days yet, and he wanted the people of Byzas to see them as liberators, rather than conquerors.

'Several children,' Corynth said, looking up at him. He had less trouble keeping pace with Fulgrim's long stride than most. He moved with an easy grace that Fulgrim suspected came from some form of training. 'Four, that we're aware of. Possibly more.' He coughed, embarrassed. The governor's father was a man of - ah - strong passions.'

'But Pandion is the direct descendant?'

Corynth nodded. 'His parentage is a matter of public record, thankfully.' He stopped and spoke briefly with an old woman, sitting in front of a shop. The woman mumbled and kissed his hand. Fulgrim watched the interaction. Pandion was a remote presence in the lives of his people - semi-divine and spoken of in hushed whispers. Belleros Corynth, on the other hand, was a man of the people.

He wondered again whether he was making the right decision in his support for the current occupant of the Gubernatorial Throne. Corynth would make a far better ruler than Pandion. But he wanted no part of it. And Pandion seemed determined to hold onto the throne, whatever the cost. He could make compliance difficult, if he decided to.

Fulgrim had considered simply imposing his will on them. Corynth was already running the government in all but name. It would take little effort to effect a reasonable transfer of power. Horus would have done it without hesitation. Then, Lupercal would have also unleashed his Wolves on the patricians at the first whiff of resistance, and erected a pyramid of skulls in the centre of Nova-Basilos.

'A thoughtful look, Fulgrim,' Corynth said.

'A thoughtful mood, Belleros.' Fulgrim gestured to the shop fronts and stacked dwellings. They seemed caught halfway between the primitive and the modem, and were all the more aesthetically pleasing because of it. 'This city is beautiful. On Chemos - indeed, on Terra - a place like this would've been grey and featureless. But here, there is colour... Vibrancy. I envy you.'

Corynth looked surprised. 'High praise, from one our governor refers to as a Prince of the Universe.' He raised his voice, fighting to be heard over the sudden clamour from the growing crowd. Somewhere, a bell was pealing. Fulgrim wondered if that was normal, or whether it was something special, just for them.

He smiled. 'Well deserved, I assure you.' He looked around, admiring the creeping curtains of ivy that clung to the simple brick buildings and the colourful high-domed roofs of the government buildings. He could detect the aroma of a nearby spice market, hanging thick over the street. Bundles of local herbs hung in shop windows, alongside the skinned carcasses of some native animal. Petrochem fumes clogged the narrow alleyways, rising from the crude generators that kept the city lit when the ancient electrical grid faltered. 'Nova-Basilos is beautiful. Are all your cities so attractive?'

Corynth's smile slipped. 'Some of them. Many are simply... functional.'

Fulgrim nodded. As he'd expected. 'There is no shame in functionality.'

Corynth looked away. 'They - we - were once greater.'

'And you shall be again. It will take time, but that is a resource in ready supply.'

'Perhaps.' The patrons of a cafe, sitting in the shade of a wide awning, sipping at cups of the local recaff variant, set up a yell at the sight of the chancellor. Corynth went to greet them, shaking hands and trading greetings. The acrid smell of the recaff caused Fulgrim's nostrils to twitch. They seemed to prefer bitter over sweet here, as a rule.

'What can you tell me about Patrician Bucepholos?' he asked, when Corynth had rejoined him. 'He appears to be the main source of opposition.'

Corynth blinked. 'A dangerous man. Influential - as you saw for yourself. And one who's grown fat on privilege. But he's wily. He's spearheaded most of the efforts to curtail the government's power of late. Some believe he's consolidating his position for a coup of one sort or another.' He smiled. 'Or he was.'

'Oh dear. No wonder he was so angry.' Fulgrim laughed. 'He's invited me to visit his estates on the coast. To... discuss our differences.'

'Be careful,' Corynth said, too quickly. Fulgrim glanced at him.

'I am always careful. But is there any particular reason why I should be, in this instance?' He smiled. 'Or is it general concern for my well-being, Belleros?'

'There have been things said. Nothing substantial.'

Fulgrim stopped. 'If there is a threat, I would like to know about it'

Corynth looked uncomfortable 'As I said, it's nothing substantial. Bucepholos may have been behind one or more of the recent attempts on Pandion's life. And yours as well, at the banquet.'

'The poison?' Fulgrim frowned. Bucepholos' name hadn't been one of those Fabius had gleaned from their prisoner, but that meant little. Pyke's own sources had placed the patrician at the heart of no fewer than three conspiracies, seemingly unrelated to the current unrest What was one more to a man like that?

'Possibly? Corynth shook his head. There's no proof, obviously. He's an old hand at these games? He shrugged. 'As I said, be careful?

'I will keep that in mind.' Fulgrim wondered how good Corynth's spy network really was. As far as Pyke was concerned, they were amateurs. The Gubernatorial Throne had once had access to an impressive intelligence network, but its reach and resources had been slowly whittled away by the patricians. Good agents worked for rich patrons, not a government that could barely pay its own troops.

He pushed the thought aside. These were matters for another day. A crowd was gathering along their route. People craned to see him, and they cheered uproariously as he waved. Word had spread that the primarch was among them, and this part of the city was slowly taking on a carnival atmosphere. 'A pleasing sound.'

Corynth laughed. 'At first, when you resisted my offer of a protective detail, I thought you were trying to bait trouble'

'And now?'

'I think you've worked a crowd before?' Corynth waved to his people, smiling sheepishly. 'You are well aware of the impact you have in person. You are like some ancient god, come again to walk among the faithful.' As if to emphasise his point, cheers echoed from the stones.

'I am but as my father made me,' Fulgrim said, pleased by Corynth's insight. 'And I'm sure you had nothing to do with this sudden, spontaneous gathering of citizenry.'

Corynth shrugged. 'It's hard to keep secrets in the palace.'

'So Lady Golconda has informed me.'

'She is an... impressive woman,' Corynth said carefully.

Fulgrim chuckled. 'She is, yes.' Pyke had proven her effectiveness beyond a shadow of a doubt since their arrival. The primary iterator was slowly but surely winnowing through the ranks of the patricians, compiling dossiers on those who could be of use, as well as those who would need to be removed. At the moment, there seemed to be rather more of the latter than he'd hoped.

A startled yelp caught his attention, and he sighed. Someone had got too close to Kasperos and the legionary had knocked the mortal sprawling. The braver among the citizenry had the inadvisable habit of trying to touch the hulking giants in their ornate armour. To see if they were real, perhaps.

Telmar loomed over the stunned man - little more than a youth, really - and seemed poised to finish what he'd begun. 'Calm yourself, Kasperos, or I will do it for you,' Fabius hissed, as he grabbed the other legionary's shoulder. 'He meant no harm. They are only curious. As we would be, in their place.'

'They should keep their hands to themselves,' Telmar said, slapping the Apothecary's hand away. 'As should you, Spider.'

Fabius stepped back, hands raised. 'I meant no offence, brother.'

'What you mean, and what occurs, are often two entirely different things,' Telmar said. You should have stayed in your web, Spider. You speak softly of them, but look around. You frighten them more than any of us.'

'Enough,' Fulgrim said, his voice like quiet thunder. The crowd fell silent. This is not seemly, my sons. Are you children, to brawl in front of strangers?'

'My lord, the Spider-' Telmar hesitated, seeing Fulgrim's expression. *'Apothecary Fabius* has insulted my person. I would have satisfaction.' His hand fell to the hilt of his sword. Fulgrim sighed.

'And how has he insulted you?'

'By comparing me - comparing us - to these... primitives,' Telmar said, glancing at Thorn, who nodded. Fulgrim frowned.

'And why should he not?' Fulgrim looked around, noting the mood of the

crowd. They were on the cusp of flight. Telmar's sudden burst of violence had frightened them, shaken them to their very cores. Stories would spread, flying through the city, and from there, the rest of the continent. Awe would turn to fear. Fear to resentment. And resentment to resistance. He had seen the same story, repeated ad nauseam, on a dozen worlds.

Fulgrim had always preferred love to fear. Love was stronger. Fear could be conquered, but love - never. It waned and swelled, but it never truly faded. He had made himself loved on Chemos. And he would do the same here.

The primarch sank to one knee and reached down to help Telmar's victim to his feet. The man stared at him with mingled fright and awe, his mouth working soundlessly. Fulgrim smiled and stood. 'I came from nothing,' he said, fixing his sons with a steady gaze. 'I scrabbled in the quarry pits, and down in the deepest mines, carrying buckets on my shoulders because the ascender blew a gasket,' he said. 'I broke my fingernails on raw ore, and grew blisters from heat and labour. You look down on them, blind to the beauty of their struggle. Blind to what they might become, if only someone would scrape the filth from their faces.' He reached down and lifted a child onto his shoulders. The girl laughed and clapped, unafraid of the giant, even as her mother wept. Fulgrim indicated the crowd. His voice had driven many of them to their knees.

'Look at them, my sons. You are the highest, and they, the lowest. It is your duty to raise them up, as high as they will go. Anything less is not worthy of you.'

Telmar and Thorn bowed their heads. Fabius hesitated. Then, he too bowed. Satisfied, Fulgrim handed the little girl back to her weeping mother and turned to Corynth. The Chancellor stared at him, his expression unreadable. Fulgrim gestured. 'Shall we continue?'

He heard the crack of the gunshot a moment before he felt the air part. He saw Corynth's mouth open, as if to shout a warning. His hand flew to *Fireblade's* hilt, and he spun, drawing the sword as he did so. He felt the impact as the round struck the sword's edge - the bullet had an explosive tip. Armour-piercing, though of such primitive manufacture that he doubted it would have penetrated his panoply. Two small lumps of smoking metal fell to the street, as his blade completed its arc.

'You'd think they'd learn,' Fulgrim mused in the sudden silence. He

lowered his sword. The shot had come from above. 'Fabius, see to the chancellor. Kasperos, Grythan, follow me.' The crowd parted like water, stupefaction turning to fear as they realised what had happened. Assassination attempts were common in Nova-Basilos, and the lower classes had become inured to them. But this was different, as much due to the target as the method.

And it was happening exactly as Fulgrim had hoped.

Corynth had been correct in his suspicions. Their tour of the city had been nothing more than bait, to draw out the rest of the conspirators who had attempted to kill Pandion at the banquet. He'd provided them a target, hoping they'd be unable to resist. Now, it was time to flush them out. Hopefully, he wouldn't be forced to kill all of them.

Fulgrim ignored the mortals as they fled, focused as he was on calculating the trajectory of the shot. He gestured towards a narrow wood-and-brick tenement occupying a street corner. An innocuous structure with a more than adequate view of the street. 'There. Third-story window.'

Thorn reached the doorway first. He bulled forward, striking the wooden doorway full tilt. The explosion that followed would have torn a normal man apart. As it was, it barely scratched the paint on Thorn's armour. Nonetheless, he staggered back, as his power armour's sensors tried to compensate for the sudden rash of sound and light. Fire scraped against the sides of the street, and the force of the explosion shattered every window in sight. Fulgrim heard screams and knew there would be collateral damage.

The whole bottom level of the building was on fire. Controlled explosions. A trap, then. A shot to kill the target, and a booby trap to eliminate any pursuers. Clever.

Smiling, Fulgrim pushed past Thorn and smashed his way through the remains of the front entrance. As Telmar made to follow him, Fulgrim turned and waved him off. 'Watch the street. They will have another escape route'

'My lord-' Telmar began, but Fulgrim was already moving. Through the flames, he could see a set of stone steps, leading to the upper storeys. He took them quickly, ignoring the flames that clutched at him. Another door awaited him at the top of the stairs. He hesitated, considering the possibility of a second booby trap. Impatience won out and he kicked the door off its hinges. Iron warped and burst as wood splintered, and then Fulgrim was on

the floor beyond. The thick wooden timbers that made up the floor were buckling from the heat. Smoke rose from the gaps, spreading swiftly. Fulgrim sped along the corridor, towards the stairs leading to the third floor. Weakened by the heat, they cracked beneath his weight.

A shout from above drew his attention. At the top of the stairs, a figure raised a weapon. A slug gun chattered, filling the air with stinging hornets of lead. Fulgrim ducked, covering his face with his arm, as he took the last few steps. The figure retreated, still firing. But not quickly enough. Fulgrim's hand snapped out, and he snatched the weapon out of its owner's grip. The man was dressed like a common labourer, but he rolled out of Fulgrim's reach like a trained acrobat. Or a soldier.

Fulgrim shattered the weapon against the wall and paced after the gunman, moving slowly, his height a hindrance in the cramped surroundings. The third floor was a narrow strip of corridor, running alongside a garret room. The gunman scrambled for the room, calling out a warning. There was fear in his voice, but not panic. These men were disciplined. Trained.

Fulgrim heard the distinctive *chunk* of a large-calibre slug thrower being readied, and twisted aside at the last moment. The inner wall exploded, showering him with bits of plaster and wood, as whoever was inside fired through it. The slug thrower boomed again, and then a third time. Before it could do so a fourth time, he lunged through the cloud of splinters and drove his sword into the wall.

Fireblade struck something and he gave it a quick twist, cutting short a strangled scream from within the room. He tore his sword free in a spray of plaster, and was in the room a moment later. It was a triangular space with two windows - one looking out over the street, the other over the rooftops of the buildings behind. A man writhed on the floor, clutching his ruptured stomach. He would be dead in moments. There was no one else.

With a hiss of annoyance, Fulgrim drew *Firebrand* and obliterated the far window, and most of the wall besides. The volkite charger was not a subtle tool. He sprang out onto the rooftop beyond. Ancient tiles cracked beneath his feet as he landed. All around him was a forest of chimneys, turrets and domes. The heights of Nova-Basilos were a world unto themselves. Fulgrim rose slowly to his full height, trying to spot any sign of the gunman who'd escaped. But he was gone.

Fulgrim turned. The structure behind him was fully ablaze now, smoke

boiling upwards into the pale sky. He could hear the clangour of alarms, as some form of disaster brigade was summoned. They would not arrive in time to save anything of value.

He understood now. The fire had served a twofold purpose. To prevent pursuit and destroy any evidence the assassins might have left behind. The rooftops had provided a ready-made escape route. He wondered who they had been working for.

'Clever,' he murmured. They were clever, these Byzans. He smiled.

This might yet prove a worthy challenge.

EIGHT

Fulgrim leaned over the iron rail of the veranda, eyes dosed. The sea breeze carried with it the sour smell of the reef flats below, and the sound of the kelp harvesters. The coastal enclaves of Chalkedon were, by and large, devoted to aquacultural pursuits. Massive fisheries dominated the eastern skyline, and fleets of ships scoured the oceans, harvesting the thick sargassum beds. The waters of Byzas had been partitioned by the aristocratic families of the patricians as assiduously as the land and air.

'Lord-Phoenician?'

Fulgrim turned. 'Yes, Patrician Bucepholos?'

Bucepholos grimaced. 'I invited you here in order to discuss this... offer of yours. Not admire the view.' He refused to meet Fulgrim's eyes, clearly uncomfortable with the giant standing on his veranda. Or perhaps he was feeling guilty.

Bucepholos topped his list of suspects as the hand behind the recent spate of assassination attempts. Even so, his invitation had not come as a surprise. Fulgrim had expected it, sooner or later. The patricians had no choice but to approach him. They couldn't kill him, or otherwise dissuade him. Now, they would try bargaining. A bribe, perhaps. Fulgrim was curious as to what they would offer him. Indeed, that was one of the reasons he'd accepted the invitation. The other was to take the measure of a potential enemy.

A pair of heavily armoured warriors flanked the fat man, their hands resting on the hilts of their swords. More warriors occupied the steps of the veranda and the high walls of the coastal holdfast above. Those to either side of the patrician eyed Fulgrim warily.

For his part, the primarch studied them with only mild interest. While their thick, segmented armour might provide some protection against the archaic carbines common here, he judged that it would part like paper before *Fireblade's* edge. And his own panoply was proof against anything they might hope to wield against him. If they intended him harm, they would have to bring an army. Still, if they wanted to try, he saw no reason to dissuade them. 'What is there to discuss?' he asked, turning his attentions to their master.

The patrician's grimace deepened into an impressive frown. 'Surely you

jest? Turning over control of our world, to the supposed representatives of some semi-mythical empire-'

'Imperium,' Fulgrim corrected.

'What's the difference?'

Fulgrim smiled. 'Scope.' Bucepholos' guards tensed, and the patrician paled slightly. Fulgrim leaned back against the rail of the veranda, which creaked alarmingly beneath his weight. Bucepholos winced at the sound. 'I am given to understand that you have three children, patrician - all sons. Is that right?'

Yes.'

'Have you allowed Apothecary Fabius to test their genetic material yet? I would be most curious to see whether or not they were suitable candidates for joining my Legion.'

Bucepholos' lips thinned. Fulgrim could smell his fear. Not for himself, but for his heirs. The only thing these patricians valued more than their power was the continuation of their lines. Many of the more prominent families would wither and fade if the Legion chose to collect the blood-tithe in full. 'He has been here already, yes,' Bucepholos said, his hands curling into fists, the knuckles turning white. 'He was very... discourteous.'

Fulgrim laughed. 'Yes. Fabius has his ways, and we all must make allowances for them. His burden is a heavy one. As is mine, deciding as I must the fate of this world and all those on it. Then, that is why we're here, isn't it?' He gestured airily. 'I suppose you're speaking on behalf of a syndicate of some sort? That's usually the way these things go.'

Bucepholos blinked. 'What?'

'On my world, whenever the executive clans would have some grievance to put forth, they would form a syndicate, elect a spokesman and send him to me. If the spokesman failed to persuade me, they would then endeavour to bribe me. When that failed, the more stubborn claimants would finance an ill-advised assassination attempt. Finally, the survivors would capitulate. Eventually, they learned the wisdom of skipping directly to capitulation.' Fulgrim crossed his arms and continued to lean against the veranda. It was a pose he'd perfected on Chemos. The Executive at Ease, as an artist of his acquaintance had called it.

'We are not the sort of men to be threatened,' Bucepholos said.

'And I am not a man to make threats. I deal in fact.' Fulgrim held up a

finger. 'Fact the first - I control the stars. Your fleet is composed of badly maintained antiques, one of which does not function.' A second finger joined the first. 'Fact the second - I control the sky. Your airships are children's toys compared to my gunships.' A third finger. 'Fact the third - I can take control of the ground whenever I wish, and there is no force on this world that can stop me.' He shrugged. 'I could continue, if you like.'

Bucepholos grimaced. 'We have no proof of any of that.' The protest was half-hearted. The patrician was too clever to believe that. But he needed to save face in front of his men, plus whoever else might be listening. Fulgrim suspected that the entire conversation was being recorded, in some fashion too primitive for his armour's sensors to detect.

He sighed. He was growing bored. It was time to give things a push. Pyke had advised against tipping his hand in such a fashion, but he was coming to the conclusion that anything else was just a waste of time he didn't have. 'Just as I have no proof you were behind the recent attempt on my life.'

Bucepholos twitched. In shock, Fulgrim thought. He straightened. Corynth had been wrong, then. At least about this. 'You didn't know.'

The patrician grunted. 'No, but it doesn't surprise me. Was it poison? It usually is. I, myself, have been poisoned twice this month alone'

'What do you know of Sabazius?' Fulgrim asked on impulse. The name - and its possible meanings - had gnawed at him since the banquet, though it seemed to have little importance to anyone but the dead. He'd meant to ask Chancellor Corynth about it, but hadn't as yet had the opportunity.

Bucepholos shrugged. 'Nothing. A myth.' No flicker of recognition or surprise there. If there was any connection, it wasn't here. Bucepholos shook his head. 'You called us a syndicate, earlier. We're not so united as that. There are factions within factions, all of us pushing against one another.'

He sounded almost apologetic. Fulgrim gestured. 'Then if you are not speaking for a group, why ask for this meeting?'

'To hear from your own lips, what you intend. What is to become of us, if we support this compliance?' Bucepholos shifted his bulk. 'What will become of our properties, our privileges? Will our rank mean anything in this new world you promise us?' He hesitated. 'What of our children?'

'Have you spoken to Primary Iterator Pyke? I assure you, she can answer all of these questions in detail.' If Bucepholos wasn't involved, then this

truly was a waste of time.

'I was under the impression that you were in charge,' Bucepholos said.

Fulgrim shrugged. 'It seems like we both made the same mistake, then.' He looked down at the patrician, who stared at him in obvious confusion. 'Make no mistake; I can do all that I have said and more. And if you attempt to disrupt these proceedings, I will burn all that you have built to ashes.'

Bucepholos licked his lips. 'And if we do not?'

Fulgrim stepped back, his expression cheerful. 'Then we will be friends, patrician. And as your friend, I will do everything in my power to ensure that you are well taken care of. But you must come to a decision quickly. There is but a month until the compliance ceremonies. One way or another, all things will be settled by then.'

'That isn't much time.'

'No. But it's all either of us is getting.'

The *Firebird* flew high above Chalkedon, leaving the coast behind. Fulgrim sat, running a cloth across the surface of his sword, working scented oils into the gleaming metal. The oils would, in theory, help disguise the odour of blood that had insinuated itself into the metal. An old bit of folk-wisdom from Chemos. 'Disappointing,' he said finally.

Abdemon looked up. Fulgrim had been silent since they'd left Patrician Bucepholos' coastal holdfast. The lord commander, recognising the primarch's silence for what it was, had decided to leave him to it. 'In what way, my lord?'

Fulgrim didn't look at him. 'I'd hoped he was the one. The way he spoke up at the announcement. The invitation. Corynth's warning. It all seemed so... perfect.'

'Too perfect.'

'There is no such thing.'

'Then perhaps he is guilty.'

Fulgrim glanced at him. 'I would have known. Whatever his crimes, this wasn't one of them.' He held up his sword, inspecting it for any imperfections. 'Have you read over the iterators' latest reports?' In the past week, Pyke's subordinates had run themselves from one end of the planet to the other, collecting data and making themselves seen.

Abdemon nodded. He'd done little else while Fulgrim took in the scenery.

The situation is becoming untenable. There are riots occurring weekly in the westernmost enclaves according to the latest reports. 'The patricians are losing control of their fiefdoms, and demanding the government despatch troops. In the meantime, they're mustering their own personal armies - ostensibly for defence of their own holdings.'

Fulgrim snorted. 'Clever, in a simple sort of way. Numbers?'

'At the moment, Pandion still has more than enough men. But given the state of the treasury, and discontent in the ranks, probably not for long.'

'Are they still loyal?'

Abdemon shrugged. He'd spent several days touring the barracks with Frazer and his officers. What he'd seen hadn't impressed him. And Frazer had waxed eloquent on the shortcomings of the gubernatorial army. 'As loyal as anyone can be, under those circumstances. It's the officers I'm worried about. The number of career officers has shrunk drastically in the past decade. The ones who are left are in senior command positions, thankfully. But the majority of junior officers are men who bought their commissions, and are loyal to their families first, and Pandion second. They'll need to be watched.'

'I assume Pyke is already doing just that.' Fulgrim planted *Fireblade* point-first between his feet, and leaned his shoulder against the hilt. 'How are Fabius' investigations coming? I have not spoken to him since the incident in the city.'

'He's retreated to the centre of his web.' Fabius hadn't left his field apothecarium since the attempt on Fulgrim's life. Abdemon had visited him only once, and that had been more than enough.

Fulgrim looked at Abdemon sternly. 'That is unworthy of you, lord commander.'

'Unworthy, but true.' Abdemon frowned. 'He has taken over twelve thousand genetic samples, from all strata of society. No word on what he's found, if anything. The nobility is complaining regularly.' He'd seen the pile of missives himself. 'Pyke's pet killers have put paid to at least three attempts to kill him.'

'Only three?' Fulgrim waved aside Abdemon's response. 'I know, it's not funny. Is Fabius aware of the attempts?'

'He's asked that the bodies be turned over to him.'

Fulgrim pinched the bridge of his nose. A startlingly human gesture,

Abdemon thought. 'And what was Lady Pyke's response to that rather ghoulish request?'

'The bodies were in no condition to be turned over to anyone.' Pyke had chuckled as she'd said it. She was more cold-blooded than she appeared. Abdemon put it down to that old Europan ruthlessness - an instinctual assumption of superiority that the ancient aristocratic lines, in particular, seemed possessed of.

Fulgrim smiled. 'The Primary Iterator is a singularly impressive woman.'

Abdemon laughed. 'Intimidating, I'd have said.'

'We are the Emperor's Children, Abdemon. We can't be intimidated.' Fulgrim looked up at the mosaics decorating the internal facings. His expression softened and Abdemon followed his gaze.

'The Antarctic Clearance,' he said. Mostly, he remembered the white. Everything had been white, even his armour. And cold. He remembered the sound of the wind, and the whine of bolter rounds streaking into the emptiness.

'A difficult campaign?' Fulgrim asked, his tone almost wistful.

Abdemon hesitated, uncertain as to how to answer the question.

'Not as such. Long. Gruelling, at times. The cold played havoc with our sensors.'

'I wish...' Fulgrim fell silent.

Abdemon waited, but the primarch said nothing else. He studied the Phoenician surreptitiously, wondering if he should speak up. It wasn't the first time he'd heard Fulgrim speak longingly of missed opportunities. It was as if he blamed himself for not being there, for not leading his sons to war. As if his presence might have prevented the casualties they took, or the disaster that had befallen them.

Abdemon was forced to admit that there might be something to that. Fulgrim's absence had been keenly felt, though none of them had truly understood what it meant. But he was here now, and the past was the past.

'What?' Fulgrim asked.

Abdemon blinked, suddenly aware that he'd spoken out loud. He felt a moment of consternation, but pushed it aside. He cleared his throat. 'I said, the past is the past. Only the future matters in the end.'

Fulgrim smiled sadly. 'Perhaps. But the past is the foundation for all that comes after. And its effects linger, whether we see them or not'

'It didn't go well, then?' Pyke said, as Fulgrim sat down on a bench across from her. The gardens were quiet, this time of day. The usual gaggle of courtiers that infested the palace grounds had better things to do than wander among the sylvan glades, which suited Pyke just fine. She enjoyed having the gardens to herself.

'How did you know?'

'Your expression. I take it Bucepholos wasn't your man, after all?'

'No.' Fulgrim frowned. 'But I wouldn't put it past him to try something in the future.' He smiled thinly. 'I suppose it depends on how badly I frightened him.'

Pyke refrained from commenting. She'd warned him against meeting with the patrician. Not out of any fear for his safety, but rather out of fear of what might come out of his mouth. Fulgrim had a way with words, but he was impulsive. One wrong word, one idle threat, and everything they'd begun to build might be endangered. She decided to change the subject. Your suspicions were correct, by the way. Someone is attempting to destabilise the agri-circle. Food tithes have been cut by a quarter.'

Fulgrim nodded. 'A lack of food coming in will affect the stability of Nova-Basilos and the wider continental government. That in turn will put pressure on Pandion, and through him, the patricians. The cracks will widen, rupturing into open revolt. The coastal enclaves are already considering it, if Bucepholos is any indication.'

'And there's no way to stop it.'

'No. Not without instituting martial law. And I'm not sure I want to.' Fulgrim leaned forward on his bench. 'Only by seeing the cracks can I attempt to fix them. But that means allowing the destabilisation efforts to continue. I must know the source.' He knocked on the map, spread across the table between them. 'There is a single hand throwing these levers.'

Pyke sat up, alert now. 'You're certain?'

Fulgrim nodded. 'I've seen it before - secret societies were rife on Chemos in my youth. Periods of unrest often see the formation of ad hoc brotherhoods, looking for some sense of control amid the confusion. Or to take advantage of it.'

'And it's not Bucepholos?' She had thought as much earlier, before Corynth had convinced Fulgrim otherwise. Bucepholos wasn't the type to overthrow a government. Not with force of arms, at any rate.

'No,' Fulgrim said. He stared at the map, as if trying to isolate the situation into its component parts. Pyke wondered at the expression on his face. Simultaneously frustrated and excited. He was enjoying it, like a child who'd learned a new game. A shiver ran through her. A child's enthusiasm, slaved to a cogitator-like mind. Ruthless, efficient... Perfect in its clarity of purpose. Fulgrim attacked the problem from every angle, until a weak point revealed itself. Then his attentions focused with deadly precision - like a duellist exploiting a flaw in his opponent's guard.

'Representatives of the patricians have visited me over the past few days, looking for some advantage,' Pyke said. She poured herself a glass of wine, and then one for Fulgrim. 'Mostly trying to secure themselves an advantageous position in the new order. They appear to think that Pandion is living on borrowed time.'

'He might well be,' Fulgrim admitted.

'Some of them even threatened me.' She smiled at the look on his face. 'Obliquely, of course. Nothing so forward as a sniper's bullet They're used to getting their way, in these matters. They have little understanding of the wider implications of our presence. Or, they might simply be that arrogant.'

'Or both.'

She nodded in agreement. 'They'll need to be dealt with. Harshly is my preference.'

He looked at her, eyebrow raised. She shrugged. 'They insulted me. I can have my people kill them, if you'd prefer.'

Fulgrim laughed. 'It may come to that. Though I'd like to leave some of them alive. A functioning aristocracy is necessary, at least at the outset.'

'A careful dance, then,' she said.

'I am a fine dancer,' Fulgrim said. 'Acclaimed for my grace and agility.' He preened slightly, and she couldn't help but laugh.

'I never had the knack for it, myself. Perhaps you can teach me.'

'I would be delighted.' Fulgrim glanced at the map again. 'I'll send Kasperos and Grythan to inspect the agri-circle, I think. The landowners there require a gentler touch than those in the mountains.' 'I had another request,' Pyke said.

Fulgrim glanced at her. Pyke paused, considering her next words carefully. 'I ask that you consider being more careful in the future.'

'Careful?'

'No more running after snipers. No more baiting assassins.'

Fulgrim drew himself up. 'I will not hide, Lady Golconda.'

'I am not asking you to. But twice now, you've acted on instinct - pursuing your attackers, rather than waiting for support. You're aggressive and impulsive when provoked. That is invaluable intelligence, for a certain sort of person.'

Fulgrim's expression didn't change, but Pyke could feel the sudden tension radiating from him. She forced herself to remain calm. She had endured the anger of one of the Emperor's sons before, and she could do so again.

'And what sort of person is that?' The words came out like the warning rumble of some great cat. Somewhere between a purr of invitation and a growl of reproach. 'Have our enemies revealed themselves to you, Primary Iterator?' He sat back, fingers interlaced. 'Are their schemes suddenly laid bare before your keen insight?'

His tone was mild, but the words were cutting. Almost petulant. She took a steadying breath, knowing that to say the wrong thing now was to lose him entirely. 'That is not what I meant and you know it, Lord Fulgrim,' she said, her voice even. 'This latest attempt may very well have been a feint, to better gauge your capabilities.'

'Or, it may have merely been the act of desperate men,' Fulgrim said. The explosion wasn't necessarily meant for me - it would have covered their escape and eradicated any evidence they might have left behind.' He sighed and leaned back. 'But...' He hesitated. For a moment, his too-handsome features cracked, and Pyke glimpsed what lay beneath. Then, he was smiling again, his mask artfully rearranged. 'But,' he continued, 'you may very well be right, my lady. Forgive me.'

She nodded slowly. The primarchs were not human, she reminded herself. They were both more and less than that. But, like humans, they had their foibles. Fulgrim was arrogant, but it was an assumed arrogance. It was a mask he wore, a part he played. Soon enough, it might become the real thing. For now, it was simply another piece of armour. A way to protect himself from a galaxy all too quick to take advantage of his flaws.

She knew his story. She knew all of their stories. A boyhood spent in hardship, forced to endure terrible privation and dangers that would have broken the sanity of a normal man. A slow, determined climb to conquest. It left little time for friendship, or for learning those lessons that made one a

part of society. She smiled. 'My late husband - one of them, I forget which - had a saying. Forgiveness is unnecessary between friends.'

Fulgrim chuckled. 'And are we friends then?'

'If you like.' She took a chance and patted his knee. Fulgrim laid his hand over hers.

'A wise man, your husband.' Fulgrim sat back. 'I was betrothed, once,' he continued idly. 'Several times, actually. Political marriages, of course. Made to seal binding agreements, or open negotiations with certain executive dynasties.'

Pyke didn't reply. His tone had become sombre. A rare thing, for Fulgrim. The Phoenician seemed to always be smiling, laughing at some joke only he understood. But now, he seemed tired. He rubbed his face 'I outlived them all, one way or another.'

'Did you love them?'

Fulgrim smiled slowly. 'Some. I think. At first. After a time, I stopped. Love was a weakness I could ill afford in those days. A billion lives rested on my shoulders, and any hesitation on my part would have doomed them all irrevocably.' He laughed softly. 'Or so I told myself then.'

'And now?'

'Now, I know it would have. There is no room for weakness in this galaxy. No room for imperfection.' He set the cup aside and grimaced. 'Poisoned, again.'

'Yes. You'd think they'd learn.' Pyke held up the decanter. She was surprised that he'd noticed. This particular toxin was fairly subtle. The people of Byzas had a way with poisons. Her servants would root out this poisoner as they had the others, and deal with them quietly and professionally. 'That was a good vintage, as well. Shame.'

'That word encompasses this entire situation. Have I made a mistake?'

Pyke hesitated. Fulgrim's dark eyes bored into her. She cleared her throat. 'I don't think so. A military response would've done more harm than good. This world has suffered enough. You've read the planetary survey reports. It isn't just society that's breaking down, but Byzas itself. It's on the cusp of multiple disasters - runaway climate change, tectonic instability, even mass extinctions of native life.'

She looked at him. 'Of all your brothers, you are the only one who had to save a world, as well as its people. You were more than a warlord or a

tyrant - you were a saviour. You raised your people up, and salvaged a half-dead world, making it over into something bearable, if not a paradise. And you will do so again. You are the Fire-Bringer, and you will burn away the old, so that the new might prosper.' She rose. 'Now, enough of this. What say we go find a new bottle of wine, and you teach me to dance.'

Fulgrim smiled and rose to his feet. 'Do you think you can keep up with me?'

'I have so far.'

NINE

'Well, this is fun,' Grythan Thorn said, as low-velocity projectiles flattened themselves against his power armour. 'Should we return fire, do you think?'

Kasperos Telmar shrugged. 'The primarch said not to hurt them, if possible.' The farmstead had been occupied by its former menials, and they didn't seem inclined towards hospitality. Mostly, they seemed to want to shout revolutionary slogans through their purloined voxcasters and waste ammunition.

A slug ricocheted off the side of his helmet, gouging a grey streak in the paint. His sensors registered the impact, and he sighed. 'Though I fail to see how killing a few wouldn't help settle the rest of them down.'

'Peaceful negotiations, brother, remember?' Thorn laughed. 'As soon as they run out of ammunition, they'll be in the mood to talk.' The revolutionaries had turned the farmstead into a crude bastion, using whatever was to hand. It was by no means impregnable, but it was impressive, in a way. From a casual examination, Telmar had identified fifteen possible points of entry. The simplest would be to kick the main gate down.

'I doubt that. Have you seen the state of them?' Telmar frowned. 'I knew it was bound to be bad, but this is monstrous. The rates of starvation alone are reprehensible. It's no surprise they seized their moment when it came.'

'If only it didn't inconvenience us quite so much,' Thorn said. He crossed his arms and glanced back towards what remained of the airship that had brought them here, to the outer rim of the agri-circle The aircraft burned merrily. Its etheric engines sparked still, amid the inferno. The crew was dead, more was the pity. A direct hit from a primitive artillery piece had knocked the craft out of the air, and killed everyone not lucky enough to be clad in ceramite. 'I'm not walking back, I can tell you that.'

'Lazy,' Telmar murmured.

'Not laziness. We are the Emperor's chosen, Kasperos. We do not walk, like common menials. We soar like eagles or, failing that, lope like wolves. But walk - never. Think of what that would do to morale.'

Telmar said nothing, content to listen and record the sounds of the fusillade Later, he thought he might put them to music. There was

something pleasing to his ear in the primitive rhythms of gunfire It was almost... relaxing.

He'd heard similar sounds often enough on Chemos as a child. His memories of that time were a confused jangle of impressions, scents and sounds, but he recalled the gunfire with startling clarity. The whine of low-velocity slugs hitting sheet metal, and the screaming that followed. Always the screaming.

He remembered that he'd been alone when he'd been found by the Legion's apothecaries. And he remembered the Spider's voice, calm and reassuring. When had that changed? Or had it? Was it simply his perceptions that had changed?

'You're humming. Are you composing again?'

'No,' Telmar said, forcing the memories back. 'I'm growing weary of this. Any chatter on the local vox-network? Has anyone figured out what's going on?'

'No. It appears to be spontaneous, whatever it is. Another sign of societal decay, I suppose. From the sound of it, it's happening all over this area.'

'Coordinated?'

'Badly,' Thorn replied.

Telmar considered this. Lord Fulgrim had made mention of possible uprisings. If they were facing a true planetary revolt, as opposed to an isolated uprising, the primarch needed to know, and swiftly. Decision made, he gestured to Thorn. 'Let us go introduce ourselves.'

'I thought you said we weren't to hurt them.'

'Fulgrim said nothing about scaring them. And the sooner we do that, the sooner we can arrange transportation back to Nova-Basilos.' Telmar started forward with a determined stride. His hand itched to feel the grip of the bolt pistol holstered on his hip. He considered firing a warning shot, and then dismissed the idea as impractical. No sense in wasting the ammunition, if there were more efficient means to hand.

Thorn hurried after him. 'Are we just going to kick the gate in, then?'

'Unless you'd prefer to climb.'

'Hardly.'

'Then I suggest picking up the pace, brother.'

They charged together. When they reached the gates of the farmstead, two well-timed kicks burst the ancient hinges and shattered the portal. Echoing

booms sounded as the gates toppled inwards and splintered on the ground. Telmar rode the momentum, allowing it to carry him into the courtyard.

Shots peppered him. He ground flattened slugs beneath his tread as he stomped towards the nearest concentration of revolutionaries. He could hear Thorn following him, his laughter booming up to quiet the screams and shouts of their opponents.

The gunfire slackened as the revolutionaries began to realise that it wasn't doing anything to slow the two Space Marines down. Eventually, even the slogan chanting died away, replaced by concerned murmurs.

Telmar snatched a rifle from the unresisting hands of a cowering worker. 'Give me that before you hurt yourself,' he growled. He snapped it easily in two and cast the pieces aside. Silence fell across the courtyard.

'Well?' Telmar snarled.

Guns thudded to the ground. Telmar nodded in satisfaction. 'Good. I'm glad that's settled. Now, someone bring me a vox-unit that works. And then we'll talk about what this was all about, eh? Like civilised people.'

Flavius Alkenex stared down at the dead man. The body was thin beneath its ragged robes. Malnourished and covered in scars. Wide welts of abused flesh, the marks of a lash or a knout. Whatever the overseers here used. 'He wasn't a slave, was he?' he asked.

'No,' Narvo Quin said harshly. 'Just a common peasant.' Quin sounded angry. Then, Quin was always angry. It was one of the few things Alkenex liked about him.

'Still dead, though.' Alkenex turned, studying the cowering overseer. A bulky, muscular lout. Alkenex knew the type - more muscles than brains, with a liking for violence. Exactly the sort of person you wanted overseeing a restive labour force, if you were more interested in punishment than efficiency. 'Do they die a lot, then? Or did he get too excited when he heard we were coming?'

When the man shook his head without answering, Quin caught him by the scruff of the neck and shook him, not quite gently. 'Answer him.' The crowd of labourers around them was growing, as word of their arrival spread and work stopped. They all had the same half-starved look to them. Many of them were convicts or political prisoners not deemed dangerous enough to be transported to the lunar colonies. Others had just been unlucky enough to

be bom in the area.

Something snapped in the overseer's body and he screamed. Quin dropped him in disgust. A murmur swept through the crowd. There was an ugly light in their eyes, to see one of their tormentors humbled so. Alkenex wondered what would happen if they turned the screaming man over to his former charges. Nothing pretty, he suspected.

'Worthless,' Quin growled. He still wore his helmet, and his voice crackled with static. Alkenex had removed his own, reasoning that a human face was more likely to encourage cooperation than the war-mask of a legionary.

'Well, he is now. Try not to break the next one, Narvo.' Alkenex gestured to the group hurrying towards them. A phalanx of armoured soldiers surrounded a man in thick robes and furs. This high up in the mountains, it was quite cold for mortals. At the sight of the soldiers, the crowd began to melt away.

'The next one had best answer more quickly,' Quin grunted.

As they waited for their host to arrive, Alkenex looked around. The ore-processing facility was a crude affair - a crashing, grinding cacophony of barely functioning machinery, housed in heavy, block-like structures. Heat sinks vented chemical vapour into the cold air. The snow on the surrounding slopes had turned to grey sludge, and a patina of grime covered everyone and everything in sight. The tin shacks that served as dormitories for the workers were clumped on the lower slopes, amongst the slag heaps and runoff.

It reminded him of Chemos, somewhat. Or, rather, what he'd heard of Chemos. He'd never seen the primarch's home world for himself, and had no real desire to do so. It sounded singularly unlovely. Alkenex preferred more colourful scenery.

He glanced down at the dead man. Something caught his eye, and he sank down. Caught inside the filthy robes was a tarnished medallion. It had turned black with age, but the outline of a clenched fist was still somewhat visible. He ran his thumb over it, wondering what it meant. He looked up, feeling the attentions of the crowd on him. Men and women, even a few children, watched him. They were murmuring something. A single word, over and over again, as if it were a prayer.

'Sabazius,' Alkenex murmured, sounding it out. Curious. The wounded overseer began screaming again. Alkenex looked down at him. 'Quiet,' he

said. 'Or I'll give you something worse than a broken bone to scream about.'

'You have no authority here,' the man in the furs began hesitantly as he reached them. Before he could continue, Alkenex rose and stepped forward.

'Patrician Clabas, isn't it? I am Legionary Flavius Alkenex. You were expecting us.' Glabas' face was all sharp panes, worn flat by the cold. His eyes were hard, but brittle. You are to give us a tour of your family's holdings here, and these facilities.'

'I-I wasn't expecting-' Glabas spluttered. He was frightened. He had expected iterators. Mortals. Not demigods. He shrank back into his furs. His men tightened their grips on their weapons. Alkenex tensed. This could all go wrong, very quickly.

Quin stepped towards them. 'What you were or were not expecting is of no concern to us. Our authority derives from the hand of the Phoenician, and this world now belongs to him.'

It was said with such certainty that Alkenex almost believed it himself. He winced at his companion's lack of subtlety. Glabas winced as well, though not for the same reasons. Quin hadn't bothered to modulate his volume. The legionary flexed his hands. They'd brought only sidearms, reasoning that anything more might provoke a hostile - if short-lived - response. But it would be fairly easy for Quin to shuck Glabas' guards from their armour with just his bare hands. And from the look on his face, Glabas knew it.

The question was, would he do the sensible thing? Or would he grab hold of the excuse Quin had given him with both hands?

Clabas slumped. 'Very well,' the patrician said.

Quin gave a disgruntled sigh. Alkenex smiled, pleased.

'A sensible decision.'

Fulgrim set aside the reports, a frown on his face. He sat at a table in the gardens, as had become his habit. It was Pyke's fault, really, but the iterator was right - it was easier to concentrate out here, beneath a sky of glass, surrounded by carefully orchestrated greenery. He took a deep breath, enjoying the carefully layered odours of hundreds of different species of flower. For a moment, he indulged his senses, identifying and memorising the distinct scents for later study.

The moment passed all too quickly, and he soon turned his attentions back to the information his sons had gathered. Kasperos' account from the high-

yield farms revealed little more than what Fulgrim had expected. Brutal working conditions, malnourishment, inadequate shelter. Crimes of negligence, rather than intent, but no less troublesome. It had been much the same on Chemos before his ascension. The workers were deprived of their humanity in order to increase compliance. But a compliance born of fear was doomed to sour into open revolt.

Already there were reports of anarchistic attacks on the infrastructure of the farms, as well as a more general agrarian revolt, such as Telmar and Thorn had encountered, along the outer rim of the wider agri-circle. Industrial farms had been occupied and fortified by desperate workers. The patricians reacted swiftly and brutally. The horizon was lit at night by the glow of burning fields.

It was worse in the ore-processing facilities, according to Alkenex's report. It was all but forced labour, and the high rate of accidents among the work crew and management both was concerning. Alkenex and Quin had seen little open violence, but the signs were clear.

'Sabazius,' he muttered, lifting the medallion Alkenex had found.

The assassins at the banquet had cried that name. Individuals among the lower classes prayed to it A folk tale, Pandion had called it. Bucepholos hadn't recognised it as anything other than a myth.

Chemos had its own slew of folk heroes, including Dig-Operator Jak, and Nimble Tolliver. But this didn't feel the same. There was a different sort of weight to the name. He studied the image on the medallion. It was a stylised hand, its fingers bent as if grasping for something. A swordsman's hand, or an archer's. It reminded him somewhat of his brother, Ferrus. He smiled. The fingers split at their tips, becoming something other - eagles, he realised. Not just eagles. He touched the aquila on his chest-plate, and then dropped the medallion onto the table, annoyed.

Fulgrim could smell war on the air. Byzas was breaking down, bit by bit. And there seemed no clear way of halting the slide without assuming total control.

Would he have to conquer the world to save it? Doing so might be more efficient in the long run, but it would prove his brothers right. An unacceptable outcome Fulgrim sat back with a sigh. Byzas was a poisoned chalice and he'd accepted it with a smile. 'Hubris, thy name is Fulgrim,' he murmured, considering the data manifests before him. He'd put Pyke's

people to work transcribing the hard copies Corynth had provided, trusting them to note any and all discrepancies. There were always a few. Even transcribed onto data-slates, it was still a confusing sprawl of numbers. But there was a pattern there, somewhere. He could just make it out, like the strands of a spider's web, shining in the light.

But was it a naturally occurring pattern, or one designed? Was he fighting one enemy, or a hundred? Coincidence accounted for much of what he was seeing. Empires didn't die all at once. They collapsed in stages - outbreaks of violence accompanied by a breakdown in infrastructure compounded by treason. The same story, repeated ad nauseam across the scope of human history. But this was something else again - asymmetric warfare on a planetary scale. It was all happening more quickly than one might expect. As if some force were driving if all. A guiding hand, leading Byzas down the path of destruction.

'Sabazius,' he said again. The answer was there he thought.

A polite cough caused him to look up. He'd heard Corynth approach, but had paid little attention to the chancellor's arrival.

'I hope I'm not interrupting,' Corynth said.

'Hardly.' Fulgrim gestured to the bench opposite. 'Please, sit. I was just reviewing the data you so graciously provided.'

'I hope it will be of some use.' He gestured to the medallion. 'Something new?'

Fulgrim nodded. 'Do you recognise it?'

Corynth straightened. 'I believe it's the hand of Sabazius.' Fulgrim looked at him. Corynth had spoken in a tone he recognised. One that many used when they referred to the Emperor. 'And who is Sabazius?'

Corynth smiled and ran a finger across the medallion. 'Sabazius was a man. He led our ancestors here, or so the stories claim. He broke their shackles and freed them from a great tyrant, who claimed to be the master of all mankind. He slew a great serpent and fashioned ships from its scales, so that they might escape. From out of the darkness, through the forest of stars, he brought them to Byzas.' He sighed. 'Or so the stories say. Myths and half-truths.'

'Half a truth is better than none. Would it be of interest to you to know that this was discovered by my warriors at a scene of unrest?' He tapped the medallion.

Corynth was silent Then, 'I had heard rumours.'

Fulgrim looked at him. 'Share them, Belleros, by all means. You were helpful before, with Bucepholos.' He hadn't been, but Fulgrim saw no reason to tell him that.

Corynth seemed hesitant, as if he were breaking a confidence. Then, 'The Sabazian Brotherhood. A scholarly society, of sorts.'

'And this society is... What? Inciting revolution?'

'No. It's all but extinct, or should be.' Another hesitation. Longer this time. 'They were a progressive society, seeking enlightenment.' A half-smile. 'They were seeking perfection. The perfect knowledge, the perfect form, the perfect society.' He mimed raising a sword. 'Their skills at swordplay were infamous amongst the duelling societies which proliferate even now amongst the patricians.'

Fulgrim listened, intrigued despite himself. There were similar societies on Chemos, and Terra as well. Corynth warmed to his subject. 'They sought to change society, one duel at a time. Not just with swords, but with debate. With literature and music and ideas, of fairness and equality. As Sabazius had, before the Tyrant of Old Night sought to silence him. As if they could rewrite the world with one perfect thrust.' He fell silent.

'You said they were extinct. What happened?'

'They made a mistake. They attracted the notice of those who held the power, and incurred their wrath. The Brotherhood was outlawed, and any found wearing their insignia or owning their writings was punished.'

'And yet, here it is.' Fulgrim gestured to the medallion.

'It was many years ago. Decades.' Corynth shrugged. 'The Gubernatorial Triumvirate were soon satisfied that the Sabazian Brotherhood had ceased to be a threat, and relaxed their strictures. Belief in Sabazius is considered a mildly gauche superstition now, rather than a sign of treachery.'

'That might change, before long.'

Corynth looked at him sharply. 'What do you intend, Fulgrim?'

'On Chemos, I was referred to by some as the Illuminator. So I shall cast my light far and wide, and see what is revealed. If there is a secret society at work here, I shall root it out, and eliminate the threat it poses, by whatever means necessary.'

Corynth frowned. 'You know, the ideals of the Brotherhood were compatible with those you insist this Imperium of yours espouses.

They want - wanted - the same things. Could you not work with them, rather than stamping on them?' There was a heat there, simmering around the edges of his words. As if the idealist in him were momentarily coming to the fore.

'If they still exist, you mean?'

Corynth blinked. 'Obviously.'

Fulgrim paused, as if considering. More for show than anything else. He smiled benignly. 'What do you want, Belleros? What do you wish for Byzas?'

Corynth looked at him. After a moment, he said, 'Something better.'

Fulgrim nodded. 'A familiar answer. But what is better? Define it for me. Better for you? Better for the Continental Government?'

'Better for Byzas.'

'The idealist's answer. Or a politician's. Which are you?'

'Can't I be both?' Corynth laughed. There was a harsh edge to the sound. A bitterness, mixed in with the sweet. Fulgrim could hear the echoes of a lifetime of disappointments in that laugh. 'Poetry, painting, wine... These are nothing. Politics is our true art. We practise it every day, in every way. We watch and calculate. We scheme over breakfast, plot at midday, and pay assassins after the evening meal. Every word, every deed, is scrutinised, dissected and twisted out of sorts, in order to further the goals of the listener.' He fell silent. 'It has always been that way. It is *tradition.'*

'And you wish to break with tradition?'

'I wish to cast tradition into the fire.' Corynth slumped, as if suddenly exhausted. 'I wish to burn it all to ashes, and raise something beautiful in its place' He looked at Fulgrim, his expression sad. 'But that is not what you are planning, is it? There is no stability in that. No order. And it cannot be done according to schedule'

Fulgrim said nothing. Corynth laughed again, more softly this time 'You can't know what it's like, watching everything you know and love degrade before your eyes. Byzas has been dying for centuries. The end is close.' He pointed. 'You are the end. Compliance is the end of us. We will become something else, and Byzas - Byzas as it might have been - will be lost.' He smiled sadly. 'Perhaps that is for the best.'

Fulgrim shook his head. 'My world was a toxic cesspit before I took it in hand. Every day, it grew a little worse, a little less habitable. Its rulers

squabbled amongst themselves for ever-dwindling profits and influence, ignoring what was going on outside their windows.' He leaned forward. 'The workers in the factories - including my parents - died in their thousands. They died from glowlung, from tainted water, from violence The machinery which had kept the factories running for centuries was breaking down, and in every generation there were fewer and fewer who knew how to maintain it.'

He stood abruptly. 'Wherever I looked, there was nothing but ruin. I did not see the sun until I was a man. I didn't realise that rain wasn't supposed to burn the skin, or that the average human lifespan was longer than thirty years.' He looked down at Corynth. 'I didn't know that there was something better, until it was almost too late.'

He turned and gestured to the closest tree 'I had never even seen a tree outside of the holdfasts of the executive clans. 'And those were pale, crooked things, with leaves like razors.' He looked back at Corynth. 'So yes, I know of what you speak. I know that feeling, Belleros. That sense of hopelessness. Of futility. But it can be conquered. I halted my world's descent into oblivion, and I will do the same for yours.'

'But will it still be ours when you are done, Fulgrim?' Corynth asked. 'Will Byzas still be Byzas? Or will it simply be Twenty-Eight One?' He frowned. 'I've taken up too much of your time Forgive me' He turned and strode away.

Fulgrim made no attempt to stop him.

It was only later that he noticed Corynth had taken the medallion with him.

TEN

Legionary Cyrius smiled.

The air of the palace gardens was redolent with the smell of fruiting blossoms. Artfully pruned trees clustered in carefully arranged glens. They crowded against miniature recreations of ancient temples, or lined the dark, cobbled pathways that cut through the palatial gardens. Marble statues peeked out from behind curtains of greenery, as if curious to see who might be invading their realm.

It was peaceful here, in contrast to the rest of Byzas. The world tottered on its foundations. Riots, panic, starvation. At night, the horizon was lit by distant fires. There was a war-wind blowing from the west, and the reports from the continental army were lacklustre at best. Cyrius gave no thought to any of that. All that mattered was the enemy before him, and the mission at hand.

Young noblemen, from the most influential families of the patricians, stood arrayed in a loose circle around him, hands on their weapons. They reminded him of predatory birds - eager to fly and hunt, but not much else Once, he might have been counted amongst their number. On Chemos, he had been the son of an Executive. One of the elite, chosen to serve by the Illuminator. Cyrius had been bom to rule. His blood was a contract between Chemos and its people, unbreakable. As the blood of these was a contract between their people and their world. Aristocracy was the same, whatever it called itself.

He towered over the tallest of them, but few of the group seemed cowed. Instead, their gazes were calculating. They were hungry for glory - another thing he recognised in himself. He wondered if Fulgrim had chosen Byzas because its culture was so similar to that of Chemos, in some aspects. He knew these people were being tested as much for compatibility with the culture of the Third as they were for compliance. These ones were too old to become his brothers, but their children, and their children's children, might yet serve beside him in the vanguard of the Great Crusade.

At last, one of them stepped forward. Cyrius was thankful. He'd been growing impatient. This one was thin, but with the look of a swordsman. His clothing was practically iridescent, and his fingers were decorated with

rings. Tattooed glyphs, shaped like grasping hands, marked the corners of his eyes and his cheeks. The glyphs were common among the younger members of the elite, though Cyrius had yet to discern just what they signified.

'We have heard that you are considered a duellist of some note,' the young man said somewhat nervously, his fingers tapping against the pommel of his blade. 'Is this true?'

Cyrius laughed. 'Truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.'

This witticism only resulted in a shared look of confusion. Cyrius sighed and drew his sword. It was a good blade, made for him by the finest artificers on Chemos. Forged from pure ores, drawn from deep veins and shaped according to the traditions of the Sulpha people. Light, but with a solid core that lent it weight and strength. He had carved the hilt himself, from the jawbone of a Chemosian shaft-cat, and wrapped it in gold wire. That too was according to tradition.

To make the perfect weapon required some involvement from its wielder. Some piece of them must go into it, else its soul would be stunted and immature. Or so the artisans had maintained. Cyrius couldn't say, either way. But he knew a good blade when he held it.

He set the sword point first into the ground and draped his hands over the cross-piece. 'Are you challenging me? If so, what makes you think you will have any more luck than the other fourteen fools who thought to do the same?'

A hurried consultation followed. He let his attentions wander, while they came to a decision. His skills, already potent, had been further honed by Tesserius Akurduana, a warrior reckoned the finest swordsman in the Legion. While Cyrius was not his tutor's equal, he fancied that he was the greatest swordsman on this planet, barring the Phoenician himself.

One finally stepped forward. And then another. A third. A fourth, a fifth, a sixth. Cyrius raised an eyebrow. 'Well, now. Is that the way this is going to be?'

'It seems only fair,' the one with the tattoos said.

Cyrius bowed low to his opponents. A calculated insult on Chemos. To ascribe more respect to an opponent than they'd earned was to as good as call them worthless. Evidently it was the same here, for several of the young men reddened and one reciprocated the bow, nearly touching his

head to the floor. Cyrius grinned and tapped that one's ear with the flat of his blade. The young man jerked upright, eyes wide. The others tensed, wary now.

Cyrius spread his arms. 'Come on then, show me.'

They were quick - quicker than Cyrius had expected, but not so quick as to surprise a blooded warrior of the Emperor's Children. Speed was their stock in trade. He deflected the first blow with an iota of the force he would normally use, and sent his opponent stumbling. He avoided the second and countered the third, spinning the sword from the hands of its unlucky wielder.

The duel progressed quickly from there. Moments later, he'd disarmed the last of them without drawing blood. As they had so many times before, the shamefaced noblemen retreated in disarray to lick their wounds. He watched them go, wondering if they'd try it with a dozen next time. That might almost prove a challenge. 'A spirited duel.'

Cyrius turned. 'My thanks, lord commander.'

'I shall have to commend Akurduana on his training regimen, as well as the quality of his protégés,' Abdemon said. He was frowning slightly, and Cyrius suspected he'd been watching. He felt a flare of irritation. Abdemon must know that he'd been acting on the primarch's orders. Fulgrim had encouraged him to mingle with the younger members of the gentry, to learn where their loyalties lay. To test them and see if they would mesh well with the culture of the Third.

'He will be most pleased to hear it, I'm certain.'

'He is one of the Two Hundred, you know. The first of our brotherhood to cross blades with the Phoenician. And the only one to last more than a few minutes against him. A record I suspect he will hold for some time.'

Cyrius peered at him, wondering if that statement were some form of warning. Abdemon was fond of lessons wrapped in anecdotes. It was one of his more infuriating qualities. Cyrius preferred his commanding officers to be plain speakers, and open in their chastisement. 'I was not aware,' he said carefully.

Abdemon nodded. 'Consider yourself enlightened. You were being observed, by the way.' He flicked a finger towards the high gantries that ran along the inside curve of the great dome above. 'And each time before that.' He smiled. They were testing you. Studying you.' He tapped the side of his

head. 'Smart.'

Cyrius frowned, annoyed that he hadn't noticed. 'Not so smart. I won every duel.'

'There are duels, and then there are *duels*, Cyrius. Learn to tell the difference' Abdemon clapped him on the shoulder. 'We're surrounded by enemies, and enemies of enemies. And all of them want to know what we are capable of, before they decide on a course of action. These people are neither simple nor stupid, Frazer's assumptions to the contrary. They're feeling us out, even as we do the same. Feint and counter-feint.'

Cyrius shook his head. 'Maybe Frazer is right. Perhaps we should just take this world, the way we have always done.'

'And waste how many of our brothers' lives in the doing so? Oh, not many, maybe, but enough to put us back in Horus' shadow. Enough to show that we're not ready to play our part in the Great Crusade.' Abdemon sighed. 'Duels within duels.'

Cyrius digested this. 'So how do we win?'

Abdemon looked back towards Fulgrim. 'Only the primarch knows. Come.'

They joined the others, who sat nearby. Fulgrim reclined on a bench while Pyke and Frazer sat across from him, a table between them. The three were deep in conversation. On the table, a large pictographic map had been unrolled. It was a crude thing, more representative than a hololith. Even so, there was something strangely pleasing about the lack of precision. Quin and the other Legionaries stood around the table, studying it intently. Telmar looked up as Cyrius approached.

'Finished playing with your little friends?' he murmured.

Cyrius ignored him. The primarch was speaking.

'We have a thousand enemies,' Fulgrim said, tapping the map with a long finger. 'Each with their own bastions of influence.'

'A thousand enemies who are not allied against us,' Pyke said. 'We are an excuse, not a reason. Not yet.'

Fulgrim nodded. 'An apt description. So how does one prosecute a war on a thousand fronts?' He looked up. 'Cyrius - how would you go about achieving victory?'

Cyrius hesitated. 'Isolate them. Manoeuvre warfare - we disrupt travel and communications across the planet. Localised electromagnetic pulses to shut

down the electrical grids, and grind everyone's decision-making capabilities to a halt.'

Fulgrim smiled. 'Does that include our hosts?'

'Protective custody,' Telmar interjected. Cyrius shot him an annoyed glance, but said nothing. These discussions were tests. Duels of words and ideas, rather than blades. It was up to the participants to seize the advantage, and guide the discourse. 'We remove the governor and his heirs from the board. Chancellor Corynth will act as regent, until such time as we deem the situation under control.'

'And where will we remove them to?' Quin demanded. He rounded on Telmar, face like a thundercloud. The entire world is enemy territory.'

'The answer should be obvious, even to you,' Telmar said blandly. At Quin's glare, he pointed upwards. 'The Byzans have an antiquated fleet. The *Pride of the Emperor* alone would be enough to conquer this system.'

'If we go that far, why not simply use the Stormbirds to strafe some sense into them?' Alkenex interrupted. They have nothing to match our gunships. Or the Legion itself. Following Cyrius' example, we move outwards, disrupting their ability to organise and communicate in an ever-widening circle, until the whole world is dark. They won't know what's happened until we're knocking at their gates.'

'That's part of the problem,' Cyrius said, seizing the opening. 'They truly have no understanding of our capabilities. The planet goes dark, they won't understand that we caused it - just that it's happened, and they have to adapt.'

Fulgrim looked at Quin. 'What are the current military capabilities of our host?'

Quin shrugged. 'Adequate. The continental army is divided into several hundred rough battalions - a third of them are under strength, but drawing pay that says otherwise. Ostensibly led by whoever paid the best bribe.'

'But in reality, led by whichever subordinate has the initiative to pick up the slack,' Alkenex cut in. 'An unhealthy state of affairs. Discipline is maintained unevenly, at best. Several garrisons have effectively - and quietly - conquered their city of residence.' He indicated half a dozen provinces on the pictograph to emphasise his point. 'The battalions are disorganised. The worst of them are run by consensus.'

Fulgrim glanced at Frazer. The commander of the Archite Palatines was

studying the map intently. 'You have something to add, Herodotus?'

Frazer twitched, startled to be addressed by his first name. He preened slightly, taking it as a sign of respect. Cyrius hid a smile. Fulgrim knew how to play on his subordinates' vanity, when necessary. Another lesson. Abdemon and the others made much of working with unaugmented humans, but only Fulgrim seemed able to accomplish it without effort.

'The army will stay out of it, unless they're attacked first,' Frazer said. Their loyalties are divided. Most of the garrisons outside of Nova-Basilos will just fort up, until they see which way the wind is blowing. We can't count on them.' He grinned. 'But neither can anyone else. The patricians will have to rely on those whose loyalties they've paid for, rather than trying to co-opt regular army units.'

'And they'll fight all the harder for it.' Abdemon laid his hand flat on the map. 'Frazer's right. The entire command structure of the continental army is compromised. Even if they're not actively disloyal, they won't react quickly - or at all - to any threat to the governor's authority.' He glanced at Frazer. 'They'll only move when there's a winning side to back.'

Frazer nodded. 'That's my estimation.'

'And a fine one it is, if a trifle depressing.' Fulgrim leaned forward. He looked up at Cyrius. 'Your answer was adequate. Textbook. If we had the time and the resources, it would be the correct one. In this instance, we must adapt. Not isolation, but consolidation.'

Cyrius frowned, stung by his primarch's dismissal. 'What do you mean?'

'It is time to turn our many enemies into one,' Fulgrim said. 'Right now, they are divided. Each seeking their own advantage. We are an unknown, and so they hesitate, uncertain of how best to proceed. Thus, we must illuminate the correct path for them, and encourage them to take it.'

Frazer gave a bark of laughter. You want them to ally against us.' He seemed pleased. 'A show of force should do it. I can-'

'No,' Cyrius said. Fulgrim looked at him expectantly. 'No,' he continued. 'A show of force would only disperse them further. We need to draw them in. A feint.' He glanced at Telmar. We take the governor and his family into protective custody...' He paused.

'Go on,' Fulgrim encouraged.

'We take control of Nova-Basilos, and the continental army, on the authority of the Hereditary Governor. Lock it down. No access to the

governor, save through us. Call the battalions back from the western provinces and the hinterlands - leave the patricians to clean up their own messes. That will annoy them, and the army will be happy to be leaving.'

Fulgrim nodded, smiling. 'Very good. And then?'

Cyrius hesitated. 'We disband the patricians. Dissolve the government.'

Pyke applauded. 'Very good. That will stir them up nicely.' Cyrius smiled, pleased. 'It'll be a symbolic gesture, of course. Nothing more.'

'Hostages,' Quin grunted. He looked around. 'We imprison any members of the patricians, or their families, still in the city. That will make some of them think twice.'

Pyke frowned. 'Crude, but effective. As good as a formal declaration of war. They'll have no choice but to react, and swiftly, to such a provocation.'

'Once galvanised, they'll move to take the city, and Pandion,' Fulgrim said. 'After that, it's simply a matter of revealing the hidden blade.' He glanced at Cyrius. 'Very good, Cyrius. You'll make a fine officer one day.' He looked at the others. 'As will all of you. I am pleased, my sons. You are all worthy bearers of the palatine aquila, and my trust.' He stood.

'Now, let us prepare for what is to come.'

ELEVEN

'I'm pleased to see you in such good spirits, Hereditary Governor,' Pyke said as the guards showed her and Cyrius into the governor's presence. 'Not every man would be cheering the dissolution of his own government.'

'It's no more than they deserve, Lady Golconda.' Pandion clapped his skinny hands in pleasure. 'And truth be told, I've been dreaming of doing something similar for years now. Decades, even.' He turned. 'This calls for a drink! Will you join me?'

They had disbanded the patricians that morning. Pandion had absented himself from the assembly, leaving the matter to his new regent. Pyke smiled, remembering the explosion of noise that had greeted Fulgrim's proclamation. She'd thought the assembled noblemen were going to riot, until the primarch had drawn his sword and seated himself on Pandion's pneumatic throne, in a signal few could misinterpret.

After that, the Gubernatorial Guard had quickly ushered the stunned members of the assembly out. Discrete warnings had already been passed along the usual channels, ahead of the wave of arrest warrants Pandion had gleefully issued, at Fulgrim's request. Most, but not all, of the patricians and their families would slip the net. Enough of them would be caught to make the rest feel lucky.

Pandion poured her a glass, still chattering. 'A splendid strategy. They'll have no choice but to make common cause. And then you'll have them.'

'So Lord Fulgrim assures me'

'Yes. Where is he by the way? I expected him to bring me the news himself.' Pandion glanced sidelong at Cyrius. 'And why is he here?'

'Protection,' Cyrius said. His hand dropped to the hilt of his sword. Pandion paled.

'I see. What now?'

'Your family will be evacuated today,' Pyke said. Pandion nodded eagerly.

'Good, good. I'll let them know we're leaving.'

'They're leaving. You're not.'

Pandion froze. 'What?'

'You're staying. In order to provide some little inspiration to your soldiers. Like a governor ought. And to draw the enemy in. Your symbolic value

goes both ways.'

Pandion swallowed. He was sweating now. 'Chancellor Corynth-' he began. Pyke cut him off with a gesture.

'Corynth is an admirable man. But he is not the Hereditary Governor. He is not Pandion IV, the heir to a legacy stretching back to this world's founding.' She smiled. 'If you leave, this whole house of cards comes crashing down. And we can't have that.'

'You can't be serious,' he protested.

'You'll be evacuated, but only after the trap has been sprung.'

'I'm bait, you mean,' Pandion snarled. They won't attack, unless they know I'm within reach. And my throne with me'

Pyke shrugged. 'If that's how you wish to see it.'

'And how else should I see it?'

'You are a necessary element in a plan to impose a working peace on a world which has been on the cusp of war for far too long.'

Pandion snorted in disgust. 'This is intolerable. I agreed to compliance in order to *save* my throne, not gamble it on a throw of the dice.'

'Life is a gamble. It's why I drink.' Pyke went to the table and refilled her glass. 'Care to join me?'

Pandion rubbed his face. 'Yes. Why not? I suppose you and Frazer are going as well?'

'No. Lord Commander Frazer, with your permission, will take over the continental army. He is eager to see if he can instil something approaching martial discipline in your troops. As for myself, I'll stay here and help you kill this bottle, if you like. As well as any others you might have lying about.'

Pandion gave her a crooked smile. 'Very well. And what of Lord Fulgrim and his warriors?'

Pyke gestured to Cyrius. 'Cyrius will remain here to entertain us, won't you, Cyrius?' The Space Marine nodded. Pandion eyed him for a moment, and then turned back to Pyke as she continued. 'Fulgrim has ordered Flavius Alkenex and Narvo Quin - both experienced line troops - to aid Frazer in seeing to the city’s defence. Abdemon and the others will be deployed as the situation warrants.'

'And that means what, exactly?' Pandion asked, before gulping a long swallow of wine. Pyke raised her glass and knocked back the contents in

one swallow.

She smiled.

Abdemon moved, almost gently. His sword hummed out in a wide arc. Red sprayed across the wall of the North Barracks. A headless body toppled. The rest of the renegade officers opened up, pistols snarling a threnody of protest.

There were ten - well, nine, now - of them, meeting in secret.

All junior officers, all with strong family ties to various members of the patricians. All with their own men, loyal to them. Enough to cause a problem, in the event the city came under attack. Which it almost certainly would and which meant that they needed to be removed from the equation.

The meeting hall was a wide, square space, decorated with trophies of past glories. Tattered banners over a century old hung from the ceiling rafters, and bits of armour, pockmarked by bullet holes, were displayed on the walls. North Barracks was home to the 23rd Keelson Lancers - a storied regiment, with a history of dynamic cavalry charges and influential alumni. They'd fought raiders in the western provinces, and mutants in the Glass Waste. But they'd never fought anything like a warrior of the Third Legion.

His sword swept out, removing a hand at the wrist. The wounded man sagged back, screaming. The others scrambled back, trying to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the nightmare in amethyst and gold before them.

The fear on their faces was familiar. He'd seen it before, too many times. The slow, sick terror of one who realises that despite all of their skills, their courage, nothing they did would bring victory. When faced with the transhuman, the merely human could only flee, or die. He let the sword rise, following its weight. Another scream, cut short. Another weapon, silenced. Another life, subtracted. Battlefield mathematics.

Outside the barracks, Abdemon could hear the boom of bolter fire, as Alkenex and Quin saw to anyone attempting to interfere. There would be no mercy there. Alkenex would kill them too quickly, and Quin didn't understand the meaning of the word. The entire North Barracks would be purged, if necessary, though he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

This was to be a lesson for those garrisoned in the city, and an example to those returning from abroad even now. One swift blow, to show the rest of

the army what was expected of them, and what they could expect in turn, if they betrayed their oaths. Even now, Fulgrim was making a similar assault on South Barracks, with Telmar and Thorn. By nightfall, the continental army would be firmly under their control.

The lord commander turned, twitching blood from the blade of his sword. Impacts were registered by his armour's sensors, recorded and summarily dismissed. 'In the name of Hereditary Governor Pandion IV of the Continental Government of Chalkedon-el-Byzas, I request that you lower your weapons and stand down.'

They didn't. And a few moments later, they died. One by one, until the last could only back away from the blood-stained figure looming over him, emptying the pistol extended in a shaking hand. 'Sabazius lives,' he snarled, as he brought the smoking gun to his temple It clicked dolorously. His eyes widened.

'You should keep a better count,' Abdemon said, lifting his sword. Flattened bullets crunched beneath his tread. 'Fire discipline isn't just for rankers, you know.'

'What are you?' the officer whispered. “What are you?'

'The future,' Abdemon said, as he drove his sword home. He looked down at the body. A brave man, until the end. They were always brave.

How many brave men were going to die tonight? A hundred? Two hundred?

He trusted Fulgrim's judgement. The plan was sound. They had chewed over the details until Abdemon could recite every one of them by heart. A perfect stratagem, given the situation. A death of a dozen cuts, each one perfectly executed and flawlessly timed.

But perfection could only be judged in hindsight.

Abdemon sighed and turned towards the shattered doors. He needed to stop Alkenex and Quin before they depopulated the entire barracks. There were few enough soldiers in Nova-Basilos as it was, and they were going to need every one of them.

* * *

Night found Fulgrim in the chambers of the palace set aside for his use, pondering the course he'd laid out. To say Pandion had been displeased was an understatement. The Hereditary Governor hadn't pressed the issue, likely

grateful that his family was safe. But he was frightened. It would be for the best if he were confined to his quarters, until it was time for him to leave. They couldn't afford to have Pandion issuing contradictory orders.

The reflected glow of distant fires flickered across the windows of his chamber. He could hear the sounds of a city eating itself alive. Nova-Basilos was in the throes of a purge such as it had not seen in a century. Political agitators had whipped the crowds into a frenzy, forcing the local arbiters to seek aid from the continental army, which was in the midst of its own purge. Inconvenient, but not unexpected. Pyke had assured him that it would be over by morning - her deadly popinjays were out there, weeding out the loudest of the troublemakers. There would be blood on the cobbles and bodies in the gutter come sunrise. There was something to be said for having a cadre of murderers at one's disposal.

Horus would approve, he suspected. Ferrus, not so much. Fulgrim smiled. Ferrus wouldn't approve of much of what he was doing. Too risky, too intricate. His brother only liked intricacy in machines. He didn't understand that the galaxy itself was a machine, and they, its caretakers. Fulgrim thought perhaps that he was the only one who did.

Byzas was a machine on the cusp of breakdown. It would take a bit of effort to keep it running. But a bit more to make it run perfectly.

His visit to Bucepholos and the reports on the other members of the patricians had convinced him that the only way forward was to simplify things. Remove the obstructions to allow the mechanism to function smoothly. That meant uprooting the nobility and dealing with whatever - whoever - was causing the disruptions. It would require a certain level of ruthlessness, but he had never shied away from the more unpleasant responsibilities of his position.

Indeed, he sometimes looked forward to them.

He fell into a loose guard stance, adapted from the Dardi of Old Europa, and let the weight of his raised blade settle along his forearms and shoulders. His panoply hung from a training mannequin, scavenged from the training field of East Barracks, after his visit. His muscles felt tight from lack of use. He rotated his shoulders, letting *Fireblade* fall like a reaper's scythe, down, up and around, until he was once more in the guard stance. The rhythm came easily. Right foot forward, right side to the enemy. Sword held to the left. An imperfect guard, as it only allowed for defence.

His gaze fell upon a set of open books lying on a nearby bench. They were old, bindings cracking with neglect, pages yellow and stiff. The training manuals of the Sabazian Brotherhood. Or some of them, at least.

Once Corynth had put him on the right track, it had been easy to find the information he sought. The continental government wasn't in the habit of throwing anything away, and there had been a wealth of material to explore.

Reading those accounts, there was much to be admired in their writings. Like his Legion, they sought to attain a perfect state of grace. But that search had led them into conflict with the continental government. And then, into exile and oblivion.

Their teachings were a mishmash of simplistic philosophical meanderings, interspersed with duelling techniques. The conflict between desire and purpose, between need and want, was a central principle, supposedly handed down by Sabazius. Life as a duel, fought between conflicting drives. Only by winning this duel could one attempt to achieve perfection in technique, and in life. Perfection was a state of balance, and the perfect society was one built on the concepts of equality and fair representation. A utopian ideal, never to be realised, but always to be striven for.

Fulgrim had little love for philosophy. It had always smacked of semi-poetic chastisement to him. Common sense wrapped in cryptic mysticism. But the duelling techniques were impressively advanced, and he amused himself by experimenting with them. They were easy enough to replicate, but there was nonetheless a certain artistry to them, when taken as a whole, that he found fascinating.

He shook off the Dardi and sought new balance, easily replicating the diagrams in the manuals. It was all smooth movements, crafting a slow pattern of offence or defence. Like a sculptor, shaping clay. A fortress of controlled motion, implacable and unyielding. The rhythm was hypnotic, reducing everything to muscle memory, but allowing for minute changes in response to uneven ground and blood loss. It was no wonder the Sabazians had been feared duellists. He heard the creak of the window hinges, and the sounds of the night momentarily grew louder. He smiled. Right on time.

Fulgrim turned, *Fireblade* whirling in his grip. A half-stroke, caught short, seared the air, but only for a moment. Then the sword was sliding upwards, reversing its course, but at a steeper angle. His feet slid across the floor, moving quickly. For a moment, he was back on Chemos, and he could hear

the jangling music of the Sulpha, as they played and clapped and cheered for him. Step, step, step. A dance of small movements, growing in purpose.

'Splendid form.'

Fulgrim did not pause. He turned sharply, his blade hissing out at head height. A killing blow, if it landed. The speaker leapt back, startled. Fulgrim laughed. 'And what are you, then? An assassin with a flair for the dramatic?'

The intruder was clad in black, complete with cloak and a plain, featureless mask. A pantomime villain come to life. The secret societies on Chemos had been much the same. Masks and secret handshakes and childish ciphers. It was something innate in the human soul that exposed itself only in conspiracy.

Fulgrim stepped forward, *Fireblade* extended, dosing the distance swiftly, until he had the intruder all but pinned to the wall. The tip of his sword tapped against the man's throat. 'Not a very good assassin, if so.'

'I'm not here to kill you.' The man's voice was distorted. Perhaps a primitive frequency modulator, built into his mask. It didn't matter, there were other methods of identification. Fulgrim prided himself on his fluency in body language. His visitor was afraid. That was good. Fear was a helpful ally in negotiations.

'I am very relieved to hear that.' Fulgrim cocked his head. 'I was expecting you earlier. Could it be that other matters occupied your attentions?' He had ordered Pyke to begin dismanding those intelligence networks in the city that couldn't be co-opted. The Primary Iterator had flung herself into the task with gusto. The local arbiters had already arrested nearly a hundred men and women, from all walks of life, with suspected ties to one hostile faction or another. Some had likely served the Sabazian Brotherhood. 'No. Obviously not. What could be more important than me?'

'You have a high opinion of yourself, Lord-Phoenician.'

Fulgrim laughed. 'Perhaps.' He stepped back, resting *Fireblade* lightly on his shoulder. 'If you are not here to kill me, you are here to talk. So, talk.'

'We have been watching you. Since your arrival.'

'I fancy you are not alone in that.'

'No. You have been looking for us.' The man in black gestured to the training manuals. 'Digging in corners forgotten by most. Why?'

Fulgrim snorted. You have to ask? 'Sabazius lives." A phrase tossed off by dead men, or murmured by starving peasants.' He shrugged. 'Perhaps it

required an outsider to see the strands for what they were, but it was easy enough. Childishly simple, in fact. How many times have you tried to poison me, by the way?'

The intruder hesitated. 'None. Poison is the tool of the unenlightened.'

'Ah. Well, that's something.' Fulgrim smiled. 'To answer more simply, yes. As to why, because...' He gestured lazily. 'I wish to determine your nature - are you an obstacle to compliance, or something else?'

'We seek only what is best for Byzas.'

'Of course you do. I wager Patrician Bucepholos and his ilk would say much the same. Even poor Pandion, so frightened for his future, seeks to do what is best for Byzas.'

'And you?'

Fulgrim paused. 'Of course.'

'Then we should talk.'

Fulgrim looked around. 'I was under the impression we were.'

'Not here'

'Then where?'

'Tomorrow. Where Sabazius first set foot upon the soil of Byzas.'

Fulgrim frowned. 'A riddle? Really?'

His guest didn't reply. He went quickly to the window and slipped out into the night, cloak swirling mysteriously. Fulgrim sighed and glanced at the training manuals.

'I hate riddles.'

TWELVE

It hadn't been much of a riddle, in the end.

The answer had been in the manuals, as Fulgrim had expected. Buried amid philosophical musings on the purpose of a blade and the desires of the wielder was the name of a place. From there, it had been a simple matter of consulting the planetary records. Now, a few hours later, he stood atop a crumbled parapet, looking out over the hinterlands of western provinces. The parapet belonged to what had once been a monastery of some sort. Or so the planetary records claimed. Whatever it once had been, it was now a seemingly abandoned stack of stone, piled high in the Anabas Mountains.

'Breathtaking,' Fulgrim said, absorbing the view. He could see the far horizon from here, and the gentle sweep of stars scattered across the fading shroud of night. He could see the distant fields and the glimmer of a city's lights. Another light blinked closer to hand - the *Firebird*, and Abdemon, awaiting his call, somewhere above. The thought of the gunship reminded him that he hadn't come all the way out here for distant lights and gentle stars.

The monastery had been constructed on the spot where the mythical Sabazius had first appeared, striking his sword on the ground to draw up the waters that fed the well around which the structure had been raised. An old story and a familiar one. Oddly appropriate, as well. He himself had been named for the water-bringer of Chemos' creation-myth.

'One water-bringer to another, Sabazius, I must say that you chose a lovely spot for it,' he said, glancing up at the cracked and weathered remnants of what had once been a massive statue, occupying the centre of the courtyard. Age and neglect had rubbed away any defining feature or sign of artistry, leaving only a rough pillar, covered in grey moss and dripping with water.

Fulgrim's voice carried through the ruin, drifting down across the courtyard. He turned, studying the empty space. 'Impressive as the view is, however, I cannot imagine that it is the sole purpose of my visit.' He waited, counting the moments. He could smell sweat drying on fabric, and gun oil. There were at least fifteen distinct heartbeats within the range of his hearing, each one pulsing with anticipation, or fear. One was familiar - his visitor from the night before.

He hadn't bothered to inform anyone other than Abdemon of the incident, or where he was going. He doubted the Brotherhood meant him harm, and even if they did, there was precious little he had to fear on this world, or any other. The Emperor had made his sons strong.

He had not made them patient, however. He sighed loudly. 'Come, come, I know you're here. Come out and introduce yourselves. You have gone to all this trouble to get my attention. Well, now you have it.'

'Welcome to Sabazius-Ut-Anabas, Lord-Phoenician.' A rustle of doth announced the arrival of the speaker as he slipped out onto the parapet. Not his visitor from the night before, but his heartbeat was familiar, even so. Someone he'd already met. One of the patricians, perhaps. Like the other, this one was draped in black from head to foot, and all signs of his identity were hidden. The only difference between the two was that this one was armed - a sword, appropriately enough. 'The heart of Byzas, some call it,' he continued. 'The place where Sabazius, and many besides, set foot upon this world's soil for the first time'

'Yes. I can see how you might believe that.' Fulgrim made a show of looking around. The courtyard below was an open, circular space, suspiciously empty of debris. The hard-packed soil had the look of having been swept, as if to hide telltale markings. Add to that the obvious repairs recently made to the parapets and roof, and the signs of more subtle modifications on the inner walls, and he was fairly certain that this place was more than it appeared. In fact, it might even make an adequate fortress, if necessary.

He smiled. His panoply's internal sensors were slowly mapping his immediate surroundings for future review. Whatever this place was, he would know all of its secrets in time He wondered if his hosts - these Sabazians - understood what they were sacrificing by inviting him here. Perhaps they didn't care. If they were that confident, it was only to his advantage.

'We are honoured that you have chosen to meet with us, Lord-Phoenician,' the Sabazian on the parapet continued. 'We weren't certain that you'd come.'

'After all the effort I went to in securing the invitation, I'd be a fool not to.' Fabius gestured. 'Though, I do wish the rest of you would come out of hiding.'

The figure on the parapet gestured. Down below, a crowd slipped from the

shadows. All the same, clad in identical black. Fulgrim restrained a laugh, and leapt from the parapet. He landed in the courtyard with a thump, causing them to draw back hurriedly. He flung the edge of his cloak back, so that the palatine aquila was visible.

'That's better,' he said. 'I wish us all to be friends.' He looked around, and then back up at the Sabazian on the parapet. 'Well, here we are. Now, why did you invite me?'

'Why did you seek us out?'

'Curiosity.'

The man on the parapet spread his hands. 'And thus, the answer.' Fulgrim snorted. 'Amusing, but perhaps you could elaborate. Is this to be a debate? A surrender?' He smiled. 'An assassination attempt?' Now that he was down here, he could detect the faint vibration of some vast, unseen mechanism, buried somewhere beneath him. Generators, possibly. Or something else.

'We wish only to talk,' one of those in the crowd said hurriedly. 'To hear for ourselves your intentions for Byzas. To see whether we might reach an accord.'

'They have not changed since the last time I spoke of them. I'm sure some of you, at least, heard them. I'm more interested in hearing your intentions.' His smile widened as a nervous ripple ran through their ranks. As he'd thought, there were members of the patricians present here. Secret societies attracted the nobility like flies to dung. Boredom was a potent drug.

Then, perhaps it wasn't all boredom. 'Byzas must change, if it is to survive,' the Sabazian on the parapet called down. 'It must shed the old, and welcome the new. It must step into the light, and banish the shadows.'

Fulgrim nodded. That was straight from the old training manuals he'd found. 'I completely agree. And the best way to do that is to cease this pointless rebellion. Compliance will see Byzas inducted into a galactic brotherhood the likes of which you cannot conceive. Progress will follow swiftly.'

'Will it?' another of the hooded figures barked. 'Or will we trade one set of overseers for another? I have spoken to these iterators of yours. They would make us peasants, grubbing in cosmic soil for the betterment of distant masters. The Sabazian Brotherhood works to set aside all that holds one man in servitude to another. We shall not condemn our people to chains, no matter the quality of their forging.'

Fulgrim shrugged. 'It is not a life of ease, it is true. There is much work to be done before Byzas can assume its proper place.' He looked around. 'But under my watchful gaze, it can, and will, be accomplished. All men - rich and poor alike - must work together.'

Someone laughed, a trifle nervously. The sound stuttered away, lonely and soon forgotten. 'And will you become Hereditary Governor then?' a Sabazian asked.

Fulgrim chuckled. 'You have a governor, I believe.'

'Pandion is corrupt. The patricians are corrupt. They must be swept aside, if we are to achieve anything.' Mutters of agreement followed this outburst.

'And what will you replace them with?' Fulgrim asked.

Silence. He nodded. 'As I thought. You call yourselves a brotherhood, but how many factions stand before me? One? Or a dozen?' He turned slowly, letting his gaze sweep across the masked faces. 'Have you even discussed the future at any length?' He smiled mirthlessly. 'I do not care who rules Byzas, only that their rule is a stable one. Your internal conflicts are just that - internal. Unimportant, against the wider tapestry of the Great Crusade. But I will not leave this world less stable than I found it.'

'Perhaps you will not leave this world at all,' someone said. Fulgrim looked at him, and the speaker jerked back with a muffled oath, hand falling to his sword. Fulgrim stared steadily at the Sabazian for long moments. Then, his smile returned.

'Ah. And here I hoped you would prove reasonable.' He looked up, as if beseeching the heavens. 'Am I to forever be beset by fools?'

Silence stretched. Fulgrim could smell their growing nervousness. They did not fully understand his capabilities, but some of them had likely witnessed his actions at the banquet. They knew how fast he could move, and how strong he was. But they did not truly *understand.* Finally, one of the Sabazians bowed his head.

'Our apologies, Lord Fulgrim. Our colleague spoke out of turn, and will be disciplined.'

'Well, that's alright then,' Fulgrim said mockingly. 'You should be glad that it is I who stands before you, and not one of my brothers. They are all, without exception, extremely short-tempered, and prone to acts of exceptional violence.' He spread his arms. 'I, on the other hand, am a reasonable being.' He pointed at them. 'But I am fast coming to the limits of

my patience. This world is mine, now, and I would make a gift of it to my father.'

In the end, that was what it came down to. Simple ownership. This world was his, as Chemos was. His to mould, his to shape. And he would suffer no one to challenge that. Only he possessed the clarity of vision necessary to steer this world on its proper course. Recent events had proven that much, at least. This brotherhood was nothing more than a gathering of children, flailing for purpose. They agitated and stoked the fires of resentment, but had no goal beyond some nebulous ideal of equality. They would set Byzas aflame and smother themselves in the ashes, if he allowed them to continue.

As if reading his mind, one of the Brotherhood said, 'If you would help us, we could make this world a fitting gift for this Emperor of yours - a paradise.'

'A paradise unearned is but a land of shadows.' Fulgrim frowned. 'It is as if you are not listening. I do not wish to make it a paradise I wish to make it *compliant.* If you would stage a coup, then stage a coup. But make it quick. You will get no help from me'

'You will stand aside then, when we come for Pandion?'

Fulgrim frowned. He'd expected as much, given the lengths to which they'd gone to kill the old man during the banquet. He shook his head. 'Pandion and his family are under my protection. For better or worse they represent the only hope of stability this world has. I will not allow you - or any of the others - to throw this planet into chaos. If you wish to form a new government, do so. But it will have Pandion as a figurehead. Order will be maintained.'

'He is corrupt!' one of the Sabazians shouted.

'Yes. But he is mine. Just as any government you form will be mine. Whatever form you wish it to take, it will be hammered into a shape tolerable to me. That is the nature of compliance.' Fulgrim slapped *Fireblade*'s hilt. 'Bow your head, or lose it. Those are your options.' It was a hard line to take, but necessary.

The Sabazian Brotherhood could not be allowed to flourish, whatever its aims. Like the patricians, they would only create instability. They wished to uplift the common man, without thought as to what that might mean for both him and those he served. The freedom they offered was merely a

tyranny of the weak. Twenty-Eight One's course was set, and nothing could be allowed to deter it. To deter him. He would bring Byzas to heel before the month was out, as he had swom.

'There is a third option - we can resist. We can fight.' It was said quietly. 'As we have always fought, so will we continue to fight. Until our world is free of the shackles which bind it.' He pointed at Fulgrim. 'You have placed Nova-Basilos under martial law. You have executed members of our brotherhood, and those we fight against. You are the enemy of all those who call Byzas home, whatever you profess.'

'Perhaps. But I do not have to be.'

'That is our hope as well.' The Sabazian who'd first greeted him descended a set of stone steps to the courtyard. 'Perhaps you would find the tenets of our brotherhood edifying,' he continued. 'They align closely with the values you espouse so vocally.' A hesitation. 'We would make fitting allies, Lord Fulgrim. More so than Pandion, at least.'

'I do not require allies.' Fulgrim tapped the pommel of his sword with a forefinger. 'And I know the doctrines you follow, likely better than you. I require an orderly society, here and now, not some impossible utopia.'

'And how will you achieve that, when you defend the very cause of this world's disorder?' The Sabazian spread his hands. 'Will you hunt us down? We have been hunted before. Outlaw us? We are outlaws even now.'

'I will dissolve the government. I will purge the ranks of the continental army and the patricians. I will burn away anyone who seeks to make themselves an obstacle to the progress I bring. That includes your brotherhood - as well as those who follow you - if you get in my way.' Fulgrim looked around. 'I will do what I must, to see this thing done. Even if it means I must put down every uprising personally.'

The Sabazians were silent for a moment. Then, one of them said, 'As will we, Lord-Phoenician. But we need not be enemies.'

Fulgrim looked up. He could hear the whine of approaching engines. The *Firebird* was nearing the designated landing zone, some distance down the mountain. 'You have a choice to make. I would make it quickly.'

It was a challenge, and a warning. He'd known before he even set foot in this place that he would find no common ground with these men. But they had been an unknown, and irritating in their ambiguity. He'd needed to know what he was facing. Now, he had their measure. Idealists and

demagogues, more dangerous in their way than Bucepholos and his sort, if left to their own devices.

'And if we make the wrong choice?'

Fulgrim smiled. 'Don't. Accept your fate. Bow your heads, and take solace in knowing that I am sympathetic to your aims. For if you do not, you will find your brotherhood well and truly extinct.'

THIRTEEN

Chancellor Corynth lunged. His form was smooth, displaying no hesitation between thought and action. His blade thunked repeatedly against the slowly rotating practice mannequin. Gouges covered it, crossing over one another, creating an intricate pattern of bloodless wounds. He retreated, blade slashing out, as if to deflect a counter-attack.

Fulgrim approached, hands behind his back. 'Splendid form.' The training room was meant for the use of the Gubernatorial Guard, but Fulgrim had it on good authority that they rarely used it. Corynth, it seemed, was taking advantage of its abandonment.

Startled, Corynth whirled. Fulgrim's hand snapped up, easily swatting aside Corynth's blade. The chancellor leapt back with an oath. Fulgrim grinned. 'My apologies. I sometimes forget that un-augmented humans aren't as observant as one of my warriors.'

Corynth stared at him, blade still half extended. Slowly, he lowered it. 'No apologies necessary, my lord.'

'Fulgrim, Belleros. Remember? Fulgrim.'

'Given the current situation, I thought it best to err on the side of formality.'

'Belleros, I assure you, it is all for the best.'

'Thus speaks the tyrant.'

Fulgrim slapped the practice mannequin, causing it to spin creakily. 'I'm no tyrant. If I were, you would think twice before saying such things.' He paused. 'Most men would anyway.' He circled the practice mannequin, studying the newer marks. 'Ambidextrous?'

'What?'

Fulgrim held up a hand and waggled his fingers. 'Are you ambidextrous? An equal number of right- and left-handed cuts.' Corynth nodded slowly.'Yes. By training, rather than inclination.'

'Admirable.' Fulgrim leaned on the mannequin. 'Would you care to spar?'

Corynth's eyes widened. Fulgrim laughed. 'I assure you, you won't come to harm. I am quite careful of my opponents.' He paused. 'In practice, at least.'

The chancellor shook his head. 'I think I'll pass on the offer, kind as it is. I've had my fill of sword-play today.' He spoke curtly, with little of the warmth he'd previously displayed. Understandable, perhaps, given that the

government he'd so loyally served had just been dissolved by Fulgrim's order. The city - and by extension, the planet - was under martial law in all but name. The bulk of the continental army was on its way back to Nova-Basilos, and the patricians were in an uproar, as their own careful manoeuvrings were thrown into chaos.

Fulgrim stopped him. 'You understand, don't you?'

Corynth looked away. 'I understand. But you are wrong. You are provoking a war for your own ends. The cost in lives alone will be enormous.'

'The ends justify the means.'

Corynth laughed. 'I'm sure Pandion's ancestor said much the same, when he created the Glass Waste. Or when he conquered the western provinces.' He shook his head. 'You bring us more of the same. I thought - I hoped you would change things for the better. Instead, you seem determined to hold Byzas in bondage of the worst sort.' He looked at Fulgrim. 'I asked you once what you would make of us. I have my answer.'

'Belleros, I will help Byzas, but there must always be bitter with the sweet.' He looked down at the chancellor. 'I cannot allow this world to fall to anarchy, no matter how beneficial it might seem. There must be strong foundations to build anything of note'

'And Pandion is one of those foundations?'

'He is what I have. He is a recognisable figurehead, a known quantity. He has shown a willingness to work with us, and an ability to adapt to a changing situation. Necessary qualities in a planetary governor.'

'Qualities you could find in a democratically elected council,' Corynth said, his voice growing heated. 'A representative government, chosen by the people-'

Fulgrim laughed. 'Which people? The tenant farmers in the agri-circle? The men and women being worked to death in the ore facilities?' He shook his head. 'No. I know who you mean, even if you don't. It would be men like Patrician Bucepholos and his ilk. A council of vipers, riven by in-fighting and politicking. Or worse, a military junta.'

'You do us an injustice,' Corynth said, almost shouting. 'If we - if the people - were but given the chance...'

'They will be. But not yet. Not this way. There must be order - peace - so that what has been forgotten might flourish anew. It is a slow thing, saving a

world. It cannot be done solely at the point of a sword, or with high-minded ideals alone. It must be done correctly, efficiently, else it will simply fall apart at the first sign of strain.'

'So you would condemn them to the status quo, in the name of efficiency.'

Fulgrim hesitated. 'That isn't what I meant.'

Corynth looked at him. 'Isn't it?' He swallowed thickly. 'This has never truly been about us, I think. We are nothing more than a - a test. A challenge. And you are determined to prove yourself correct, to prove your way is the best way, whatever the cost. Are we nothing more than game pieces to you and this Imperium of yours? If so, I am not sure I wish to live in it.'

'Belleros...'

Corynth slumped. 'There is nothing more to say. You are in control, after all, and I am chancellor in name only. Soon, I might not even be that.'

He slipped past Fulgrim, and the primarch let him go. Corynth stopped at the door. 'Why did you turn them down?' he asked. 'They could have been of help to you.'

Fulgrim didn't have to ask who he was referring to. 'They are children. And I have no time for children's games.' He frowned. 'Byzas must be brought into compliance.'

'That is your desire, not your purpose.'

'It is both.'

'That you think that, is proof that you don't understand anything.'

'A question for you then - why did you turn me down, that first night? All of this could have been avoided, had you seized the laurel.'

Corynth didn't answer. He left without a word. Fulgrim almost pursued him. He was shaking with anger. He wanted to destroy something. He spun, smashing his forearm through the practice dummy, shattering it.

He looked down at the broken mannequin. 'Damn it.'

Corynth was wrong. He understood perfectly. The way forward was clear. Pandion was the best choice of a bad lot. He provided stability - consistency - in an unstable time. A known quantity. To overthrow him, to replace him with a council of unknowns, or worse, a group of men the common people of Byzas hated, was to risk planet-wide upheaval. The patricians might have accepted Corynth as regent, but they would never accept an elected body of malcontents. Just as they would not suffer one of their own to rule over the

rest. No, Pandion was the least offensive choice.

That Corynth couldn't see that was proof his idealism was outweighing his common sense. The changes he desired could be made within the existing system, if only he had the patience to do so. Fulgrim laughed harshly. And who was he, to fault another man's impatience?

How much had his impatience cost him already, in his life? How much might it yet cost him, if he wasn't careful? His hands curled into fists. It was hard. Mortals moved and thought so slowly. It took them an inordinately long time to come to blindingly obvious conclusions. To see what must be done. That was why he had to make the choices he made, to make up for their imperfections. To see that their flaws did not cause harm to them, or others. His fists tightened, and his knuckles popped beneath his gauntlets.

He had made the mistake of leaving mortals to find their own way once before, and they had proven themselves incapable of following the correct path. He closed his eyes, feeling again the crackle of the stun baton against the skin of his palm, and the crunch of the Caretaker's spine as Fulgrim seized him and shook the life from him. The Callax worker protests had shown him the consequences of disorder. Instability led to violence, and violence to death. Not the deaths of the rich or influential, but the deaths of the worker and the peasant. It was the duty of the strong to protect the weak, to see that they did not suffer from their own foolishness.

Corynth didn't understand that. He saw only oppression, instead of necessity. He saw enforced stability as a cage, preventing growth, rather than as a necessary evil. But he would learn. Fulgrim would teach him. Teach them. He was the Illuminator, and his light would guide them on the path ahead.

Despite his confidence, he felt a flicker of uncertainty. A skilful duellist forced his opponent to make the moves that benefitted him least, and the duellist the most. He had called the Sabazian Brotherhood's bluff. Only time would tell whether or not that was exactly what they'd wanted.

The floor trembled. He turned, listening. He heard a distant boom. Muffled shouts. An alarm began to sound, its piercing wail cutting across his eardrums. Fulgrim raced to the window and flung it open. Streaks of orange and red striated the sky. The shapes of low-altitude airships spun in a slow, stately duel beneath the sun, and the chatter of stub-cannons ratcheted through the air. As he watched, an airship banked, expelling its explosive

cargo.

Airships. They were bombing the army shipyards, destroying the few airships that weren't otherwise deployed. Bucepholos was smart. The city would be well and truly cut off once the enemy arrived to encircle it.

Fulgrim stepped back, a smile of anticipation stretching across his face. All doubt was forgotten as the Illuminator receded, and the Phoenician readied himself.

It had begun.

The mutant grunted as Fabius took a sample from the back of its neck. It was a stunted thing, covered in tumours beneath its robes and bandoliers of antique ammunition. More of them waited nearby, watching the process with something approaching awe.

'That's it. It's all right. I'm not here to hurt you.' The words came out in a steady monotone, repeated at regular intervals. Fabius wasn't sure whether or not the creatures understood his words. So long as they found his tone soothing, it didn't matter.

The sludgy oasis sat along the northernmost border of the Glass Waste, where the fens of the border country gave way to the grasslands of the Chalkedonian lowlands. A few barren trees hunkered over a wide pool of dark water, where the scabby steeds of the mutants were thirstily gulping their fill. The long-limbed equoids were only distantly reminiscent of Terran equines, being more related to ungulates. They had stiff patches of iridescent hair covering their muscular, leathery forms, and their splayed hooves reminded him of hands.

Toxicity warnings crawled across the interior of his helmet, alerting him to the high levels of radiation in the air. The Glass Waste was saturated with it - it was in the water, the air, the soil, even in the few living things that had managed to survive. The inhabitants of the Waste were on a slow, inevitable slide to complete genetic dissolution. Each generation more mutated - and smaller - than the last. But those who remained were better adapted to survive the various ailments that afflicted them.

The continental government had limited contact with the few inhabitants of the wastes, save when the more desperate groups of mutants would raid the outer rim of the agri-circle, looking for food. It had taken their people weeks to convince one of the more civilised groups to meet with the

newcomers. Time well spent, in Fabius' opinion. They might have wasted months trying to track them down, otherwise.

When he'd finished, the mutant rubbed its neck and looked up at him with milky eyes. It mumbled something in its slurred tongue; and he nodded. The dialect was as degraded as the speaker, but he understood it nonetheless. The children, next,' Fabius said. 'Males only.'

'Why do you waste time talking to them?'

An ident-rune gave a ping, identifying the speaker. Alkenex, Flavius. A crawl of information followed, but Fabius ignored it. He barely cared about the fool's name. But ignorance was to be challenged. 'Bedside manner,' he voxed flady.

Alkenex laughed. Alkenex was always laughing. The sound made the mutants twitch, and clutch their weapons more tightly. Fabius hissed in annoyance.

'Is that what you call it?' Alkenex continued. He seemed to think they were having a conversation.

Fabius turned. Alkenex stopped laughing. Fabius studied his brother-legionary, dissecting him with his eyes. Instinctively, Alkenex's hand fell to the hilt of his blade. Fabius smiled and turned back to his work. The first of the children were brought forward by a shuffling thing he assumed was a parent.

'Yes. It is important that they do not fear us, or this procedure.' The children whimpered as he took his samples, but that was to be expected. 'Fear leads to resentment, and resentment to resistance. If they resist, there is a significant danger of waste.'

'Waste of what?'

'Genetic material,' Fabius said, as if talking to an infant. The cogitation units in his vambrace whirred softly, calculating. The samples would be compared to those taken from the rest of the populace, to better develop a baseline. Once the average had been established, he could begin weeding out the exceptional from the inferior. A long, thankless task, but one he performed with all due diligence. To falter, even for a moment, was to risk wasting a valuable resource.

'Genetic-? Are you serious?' Alkenex spat. These creatures are walking cancers!'

'That they are walking at all implies a certain hardiness, wouldn't you say?'

Fabius gestured for the next group to come forward. 'And that is what we need.'

'We need nothing from these... animals'

Fabius closed his eyes. He felt his temper fraying, with every word out of the other legionary's mouth. They didn't understand. None of them. They saw, but refused to comprehend. Even those like Abdemon, who had witnessed the blight first-hand, did not truly grasp the enormity of it. 'You are not here to dictate what we do or do not need, brother. You are here only to see to it that I return to Nova-Basilos in one piece. And you can do that without talking, I think. In fact, why not go wait in the Stormbird? I won't be long.' He gestured towards the gunship, some distance away.

Alkenex turned away. 'Suit yourself, Spider.'

Fabius froze. A child whimpered, more shrilly than the others. He looked down and released the boy, letting him scamper away. He turned. “What did you call me?'

Alkenex glanced at him, his pose lazy. 'Kasperos challenged you.'

'And so?'

'You didn't accept.'

'Why would I?'

'Honour.'

Fabius laughed. 'There is no honour in killing a fool.'

Alkenex's fingers tapped at the hilt of his sword. "Which one of you is the fool?'

Fabius turned away. 'Both. Him for making the challenge, and me for antagonising him.' He shook his head. 'It's so easy for you. All of you. Your enemy is across the field, always. But my enemy is harder to bring to battle. My enemy is in our very blood and bone, and strikes where I least suspect, at every turn.'

'The blight is gone.'

The blight was a story, for most of the new recruits. A thing that had happened, and might yet happen again. A cautionary tale. But they could see the reality of it, if they so chose. The lines of grief and despair, etched into the faces of the Two Hundred. Cracks in marble. Imperfections, visible only if you knew where to look.

And Fabius could see nothing else.

He laughed again, startling the huddled mutants. 'Is that what you believe?

Then you are even more foolish than I thought.' He spun and slapped his vambrace. 'We are imperfect, Alkenex. Every one of us. Our genetic code is as rotten as that of these creatures you so casually dismiss as animals. But somehow, they survive, where we do not.' He advanced, forcing Alkenex back a step. 'Why are we so fragile, brother? A twist in the helix, and we break like twigs.' He snapped his fingers for emphasis. 'Answer me that, eh? Use that fancy sword of yours and carve me a path to the truth.'

'Fabius.'

Fulgrim's voice, echoing suddenly through the vox-link, cut through his anger like a knife. Fabius calmed immediately, before replying. 'Here, my lord.'

'Return to Nova-Basilos immediately. The situation has escalated.' 'But-' Fabius began. Alkenex turned, head cocked.

'Hear that?'

Fabius did. The low-pitch whine of an etheric engine. The mutants scattered, moving swiftly. They knew what that sound meant. Alkenex cursed and lifted his bolter. Time to get back to the gunship, Spider.' He grabbed Fabius' arm. Fabius jerked free and started towards the Stormbird, Alkenex pacing after him. *'Fabius?'*

'Returning now, my lord. But - there's an airship incoming.'

'Ah. *Do as you see fit, my sons. Let nothing hinder you.'*

Fabius glanced at Alkenex. 'You heard the primarch?'

Alkenex grunted. 'Move faster.'

The airship swept south, punching through the clouds like an angry wasp. It was a small, narrow thing, big enough for only a single pilot and moving fast. Primitive turbines explained the speed. Fabius had known that the continental government had a few assault craft in their fleet, but he'd never thought to see them in action. 'He's flying low,' he said.

'Piss-poor targeting systems,' Alkenex said. 'He has to be right on top of us, if he wants any chance of hitting us with those stub-cannons.' He gestured briskly. 'Keep going. I'll be along shortly.'

'What are you planning?'

'This is twice now that someone on this mud ball has tried to kill me. I intend to show them what I think of that.'

'Don't be foolish. All it takes is one lucky shot...'

'Then I'll have to make sure I get lucky first, eh?' Alkenex strode to meet

the oncoming airship. Light flashed beneath its hull. Fabius heard the dull chatter of guns. The dead soil was churned into clouds of dust as the airship swooped towards them. Whoever was flying it was trying to cut them off before they got to the Stormbird.

A good plan, if they had been dealing with the merely mortal. As it was, Fabius reached the gunship's embarkation ramp in time to see Alkenex's duel with the airship in full.

The airship dove, guns spitting. Alkenex set his feet and took aim. He barely twitched as stray rounds plucked the paint from his ceramite. The bolter roared. The airship twitched, like a wounded animal. Alkenex stitched the hull with steady precision as the ship passed overhead, putting out one round after the next. The explosive rounds were meant to punch through armour, and they easily perforated the thin hull plating of the primitive craft. Muffled explosions sounded, and smoke boiled out of the stricken vessel. Alkenex followed it, still firing, intent on bringing the airship down.

He turned away only when it had finally struck the ground in a burst of fire and noise. He reloaded as he strode back towards Fabius and the gunship. 'Well, that was easy enough.'

Fabius pointed north. More lean wasp-shapes were arrowing through the clouds. Their attacker hadn't been alone. Alkenex grunted. 'Ah. My mistake.'

'Get on board,' Fabius said acidly. 'I have a feeling that the Phoenician is going to require our services before the day is out.'

'It's Bucepholos,' Pyke said. Her voice echoed through the cavernous confines of the palace situation room. Primitive cogitators and data-banks lined the walls, and view-screens that flickered with static showed scenes throughout the city. Staff - mostly Pyke's, though there were several clerks seconded from the Archite Palatines - moved to and fro, quietly going about the business of updating the hololithic data map Fulgrim had installed with up-to-date reports of the developing situation.

'Of course it is.' Fulgrim leaned forward, tapping the map. He studied the scrolling data carefully. 'Who else?'

'No one important,' she spoke crisply, no sign of distress or worry in her tone. The old woman was iron. 'Patricians Glabas, Makrembolytes and

Axouche, for sure. A few dozen other, lesser patricians, mostly from the agri-circle. It looks like patrician Phokas is bringing his security forces - a few thousand men - down to join them. That'll be a substantial force, when it gets here. They've occupied the dosest major rail and air terminuses as well, meaning the army units we've called back are going to be late, if they arrive at all.'

'Any sign of the Brotherhood?'

'None, but that doesn't mean they're not there. My sources say that Bucepholos and his allies are acting out of desperation. Someone provoked them into launching a full-scale attack. That bombing raid on the shipyards was just a way of announcing hostilities. I've also had word from the western provinces, of uprisings against the patricians and the continental government both.'

'They've attacked Fabius and Alkenex, as well,' Fulgrim said. 'They are moving, as I knew they would. I've made the city a target, and they are taking aim in a most obliging fashion.' He smiled, pleased. It always made for a satisfying feeling, when the enemy did exactly what was expected of them.

The hololithic map of Chalkedon was divided up into sectors, each one highlighted in different colours. The patricians were mobilising, though few of them had yet to reveal their loyalties one way or another. That too he'd expected. The longer things took, the more likely they were to throw in with Bucepholos and his lot - or worse, strike out on their own. He needed to put an end to this, swiftly and decisively.

Abdemon gestured to the map, illuminating several areas close to Nova-Basilos. 'There are forces moving from the north and the west, along the old trade roads. Infantry and artillery, with minimal air support - we saw some of that earlier today. The local patricians are moving to control all routes into and out of the city, before Bucepholos gets here. Probably so they can bargain with him over access.'

'Lord commander?' Fulgrim asked, glancing at Frazer.

The lord commander of the Archite Palatines frowned. The walls won't stand up to a concentrated barrage, but the outer emplacements will bloody the noses of anyone stupid enough to get that close.' He tapped the map, highlighting a section of the city walls. 'If it were me, I'd use the air support to get the infantry in close, under the range of the emplacements. Thanks to

that bombing raid, we don't have much in the way of anything that can match their air power - I still don't understand how that was allowed to happen, by the way.' He glared at Pyke, who shrugged.

'I'm not in charge, Herodotus. Don't look at me I was following orders.'

'It was a necessary sacrifice, lord commander,' Fulgrim said smoothly. 'I want them to think that they have a chance. Otherwise, this will be no fun at all.'

Frazer and Pyke shared a look as the assembled Space Marines chuckled appreciatively. Frazer cleared his throat. 'You'd know best, my lord.' He turned his attention back to the map and continued his assessment. 'Once they have the emplacements under control, they can pound the city with its own outer defences. Or just sit tight, and wait for the ensuing panic to do their job for them.'

Fulgrim nodded, pleased by the lord commander's assessment. It matched his own, quite closely. 'They won't wait,' he said. 'Remember - they are as much at the mercy of time as we are. It is in everyone's best interests to resolve this swiftly. If they can force the government - and by extension, us - to capitulate, they force us to deal with them on their own terms. If we hold out, there is every chance that their coalition will fracture under the weight of competing goals.'

He studied the map. 'I have worked too hard to ensure that this particular hydra has only a single head. We need to remove it, before it can bifurcate once more. But that means teasing the beast fully into the open.' He looked at Quin. 'I need you to hold those emplacements. Can you do it?'

Quin slammed his fist into his chest. 'Alone, if necessary, my lord.'

Fulgrim smiled. 'Take Flavius with you, just in case.' He gestured to Frazer. 'You must hold the walls - the city, in fact - and keep the situation from becoming untenable. I don't care if we lose whole districts, but the palace must remain inviolate. So long as Pandion is in our custody, we hold the moral authority, and our position remains the stronger.'

Frazer nodded. 'Easily done. Pandion was paranoid enough to bivouac a substantial number of troops in the city, even before things started to go wrong.' He paused, one finger tapping the laspistol holstered at his waist. 'We won't be able to count on all of them, of course. Even after your... demonstration a few days ago.'

'Already taken care of,' Pyke said calmly. Frazer glanced at her. She smiled

and raised a glass of wine. 'I winnowed out the last of the more unreliable members of the officer caste a few days ago. So many accidents. Unprecedented, I'm told.' She emptied her glass. 'But we'll soldier on in their absence, I'm sure.'

Frazer laughed harshly. 'I think I'm beginning to like you, Lady Golconda.'

'I knew you'd come around.'

Fulgrim looked at Abdemon. 'Take Telmar and Thorn, and head off those patricians who are advancing towards the city, but haven't yet joined Bucepholos.'

Abdemon frowned. 'How?'

'Remind them of their loyalties. And what awaits those who spit on the Emperor's friendship.' Fulgrim hesitated. 'Don't kill all of them, if you can help it I need enough of them intact to throw at Bucepholos.'

'Is that wise?' Pyke said, when Abdemon and the others had departed to see to their duties. 'If I were Bucepholos, I'd run at the first sniff of my former allies turning on me. We won't be able to catch him, or the others. Unless you intend a surgical strike, right into the heart of their army.'

Fulgrim grinned. 'Something like that. But not yet. Bucepholos and the renegades aren't the only enemy we face, remember?' He gestured to the map. 'Amusing as this is, it's all just a preamble.'

'You're talking about this Sabazian Brotherhood of yours.' Pyke frowned. 'You think they're going to - what? Pop out of the woodwork at the last moment? Obligingly reveal themselves for the chop?'

'That is exactly what I think, Lady Golconda. They will have no choice. Especially given that I ordered the army units en route to turn around and return to the western provinces and the agri-circle the moment the first bombs fell on the shipyards.'

Pyke nodded slowly. If she was annoyed that he hadn't informed her of the change of plans, she didn't show it. Then, iterators had to be adaptable. 'You wanted to draw them out, tempt them into taking advantage of the worsening situation.'

'And now, I will bloody them. The army will be given orders to aid those patricians willing to declare for the continental government. Their commanders are to sanction anyone rebelling against the authority of the patricians and the Hereditary Governor with extreme prejudice. Crucifixions are, I believe, still popular here.'

Pyke grimaced. 'Harsh measures.'

'But necessary ones. The point must be made, and made firmly.' Fulgrim frowned. 'I must make myself an enemy of all Byzas, so that Byzas will unite to deal with me.' He smiled sadly. 'The Sabazian Brotherhood will have no choice but to meet with Bucepholos and the other patrician leaders, to propose an alliance, once this initial attack fails and the executions begin. The army units in the western provinces and the agri-circle will put pressure on Bucepholos, forcing him to meet with the Sabazians, or risk fighting a war on two fronts. And then, I will have them.'

'And you know where this supposed meeting will take place?'

'Oh, yes,' Fulgrim laughed. 'They showed me.'

FOURTEEN

'You have mobilised,' Grythan Thorn murmured. The legionary knelt amid the coarse grasses, scrubbing gently at the wide, flat skull of a canid. The canid thumped its bushy tail, enjoying the attention. Thorn glanced up at its owner, sitting stiffly in the saddle of an equoid, a carbine resting across his legs.

'We have,' Patrician Phokas said. He was tense. Thorn could see the sweat on his brow, and hear the thready hum of his pulse. His nervousness was matched by that of his followers. There were fifty of them - minor sons, cousins and the like Out for an evening's hunt, on the eve of battle. Thorn knew the type well enough. He was their type. The third-bom son of a minor executive clan, offered up to a superior in return for what? Influence, perhaps. Consideration.

The army they led was small. A few thousand men, mostly agri-labourers pressed into service. Some artillery, antique even by the standards of this world. Several heavy, tracked haulers, carrying supplies and ammunition. Unimpressive, but potentially useful, in the right hands. Thorn flexed his sword arm, loosening the muscles.

He gave the canid a last scratch and stood, servos humming. The patrician's steed snorted and backed away. The steeds of the others shifted, stamping the ground in agitation. He had surprised them, appearing as if out of nowhere. It was inconceivable to them that one so large could move so quietly, so gracefully. In truth, he had been waiting for some time, after having calculated likely routes they would take.

They were a day's march from Nova-Basilos, as mortals judged such things. Close enough that messengers were riding back and forth between the converging armies on a regular basis. The renegade patricians were negotiating, bartering their loyalties to one another in return for future consideration. Any of them might try to seize the capital for themselves, if they were of a mind. But they all knew that to do so would provoke a response from the others. So, they were attempting to decide among themselves who would be king, in order to avoid such a quagmire. It was almost civilised.

'For whom?' Thorn said.

Phokas seemed taken aback by the question. Thorn smiled. He had a pleasant smile, or so he was told. He had practised it with the same devotion Kasperos and Cyrius did their blade-work. A good smile was like a sharp blade - always useful. But when the one failed, it was good to have the other handy. He draped his hand over the hilt of the Charnabal sabre he wore. One of only six, and a gift from the Phoenician, as a sign of his esteem. Thorn had spent every day since ensuring that he never failed to deserve that honour.

'Well?' Thorn pressed. Phokas said nothing. Thorn's smile widened. Lord Fulgrim had been right. Not that Thorn had ever doubted him. From the moment of their arrival, the Phoenician had orchestrated this moment, and all those yet to come. A grand conductor, a maestro, of the old school. 'Come, come, we're all friends here'

'We are not friends,' Phokas spat. You are - I don't know what you are But you're no friends of Byzas.'

Thorn sighed. 'Well, that makes two of us, doesn't it?' He drew his sabre and planted it point first in the ground. 'You have two choices, my friend. With one, your story ends here. With the other... Well.'

The same choice was even now being offered to the other patricians approaching the city, from the east and the south, by Lord Commander Abdemon and Kasperos. Three armies, defeated by nothing more than the art of gentle persuasion and the implication of sudden, horrific violence. What more perfect way to defeat an enemy, than with the mere promise of what you might do to them?

Still, some were harder to convince than others. Phokas swallowed, nervous. 'I have an army.'

'Only a small one.' Thorn left his sabre standing upright and unhooked his helmet from his belt. As he pulled it on and the seals snapped into place, targeting displays blinked to life. The men around Phokas drew back, stinking of fear.

Word had spread, and even the dullest, backcountry aristocrat was aware of what a single Space Marine was capable of. True, their reputation was somewhat overblown by this point. Even Thorn couldn't kill a thousand men by himself. Some of them would get away, while he was busy with the others.

'I won't kill them all, of course. I'll need some of them alive.' He rested his

hands on the pommel of his sabre and looked at Phokas.

'Time to choose whose side you're on, patrician. But choose wisely.'

Nova-Basilos shuddered beneath the hammer of war.

The armies of the renegade patricians had mobilised swiftly, and launched their assault within hours of the initial bombardment. Their airships cleared the roads and bridges of all obstacles, allowing for the steady advance of their warriors towards the artillery emplacements of the outer districts.

With most of the continental army still en route or diverted elsewhere, the renegade commanders were confident of facing minimal resistance. Nonetheless, the emplacements themselves were fully crewed, and they cried a deadly greeting. Radium beams glittered in the dark, and pneumatic bombards thumped out a crushing rhythm. Hypervelocity cannon cycled to life and emitted thunderous shrieks. Men died in their hundreds, scythed from the field by weapons that had waited in silence for this moment for centuries.

But not enough. Advances faltered, retreated, recovered. Like waves lapping at the shore The aerial bombardment was unceasing, and though the occasional airship plunged to the earth in a shroud of flames, there were still almost too many to count.

Narvo Quin watched the smoke boil upwards from the outer districts - the shanty towns that had grown up along the rail junctions were aflame - and sighed in satisfaction. This was where he belonged. Not in quiet rooms, full of soft music, but here, where his skills could be put to their fullest use. Flames painted the air in hues of red and gold, and he was moved to record them, for later exploration. In oils, perhaps. Or a sonnet.

His reverie was disturbed by a sudden shout. He turned. 'Yes, corporal. What is it?'

'They've broken through on the eastern flank, my lord,' the human said, his face slack with fright beneath a mask of ash and blood. His uniform had lost its crisp sheen, and a stained bandage was clipped tight about his bicep. He clutched a primitive cylinder pistol in one palsied hand, its lanyard of golden wire dangling forlornly in the firelight. 'What do we do? What are your orders? Should we fall back?'

'Fight or die, corporal,' Quin said, activating his power axe. There is no third choice.' He turned back, his augurs highlighting the dosest enemy

formation. 'Follow me, whatever your decision.' He started walking without waiting for a reply.

He stumped through the growing flames, leading the gubernatorial troops towards the enemy. Which enemy, he didn't know, nor did he care. That they dared to approach him with hostile intent was enough reason for them to die. Such foolishness could not be allowed to pollute the planet's genetic tithe.

He and Alkenex had been left behind to oversee the defence of Nova-Basilos. Certainly not the most glorious of tasks, but a necessary one. The continental government must not be allowed to fall. Stability must be maintained, whatever the cost. Thus spake Fulgrim. That was enough for Narvo Quin. He would hold this place.

Quin advanced into alternating fields of suppressing fire The enemy was disciplined. Determined. Even so, they were little more than a nuisance to a warrior of the Third. Quin slowed his pace ensuring that he drew the maximum amount of fire from his more fragile allies. The gubernatorial soldiers followed him hesitantly at first, then with more enthusiasm, as his axe sheared through the first of the armoured warriors to reach him.

His armour's sensors registered and catalogued an impact against the eyepiece of his helmet, immediately extrapolating backwards to pinpoint the firer. He turned, targeting overlays in his helmet cycling green as he lifted his bolt pistol. He snapped off two shots, knocking two more enemy troopers head over heels. The explosive shells fairly ripped the men asunder, despite their protective gear. Quin laughed. The sound echoed across the emplacement, broadcast by his armour's vox-unit.

'Having fun, Narvo?'

'I am amused,' Quin acceded, as Alkenex's voice echoed in his head. He backhanded a running soldier, reducing the unfortunate man to red ruin. 'Where are you?'

'Close. I could get a target lock on you, if I was of a mind.'

Quin ground his teeth and took out his frustrations on the enemy. The bolt pistol bucked in his grip as the targeting overlays cycled and flashed. 'The city?' he said, after he'd calmed himself. He could hear the rumbling thump-thump of a nearby pneumatic bombard. A radium cannon shrieked, somewhere to his left, and the air burned an eerie green for a moment. Screams danced through the smoke, mingling with the crack of rifle fire.

'Still standing,' Alkenex voxed. *'They outnumber us three to one, but you've evened the odds some. Frazer has ordered fresh units to advance from the inner districts. Their air support is tangled up with what's left of ours.'*

Quin looked up. Overhead, through the clouds of smoke, he could make out the round shapes of airships, sliding from the city. After the bombing raid, the continental army only had a handful of the larger craft left. But they would be enough.

'Projected losses?'

'Fifteen to twenty percent'

'Well within acceptable parameters.' Quin spun his axe and brought it down on a cowering trooper wearing the insignia of a breakaway province. The man burst like an overripe fruit as the power field liquefied armour, flesh and bone. Around him, mortals fought and died with a bravery he knew that few of his brothers would understand. The fragility of the human form was outweighed by the sturdiness of its soul. So long as the soul remained firm, a man could do great things indeed.

A familiar shout caught his attention. The corporal from before was down and bleeding, one of the black-armoured enemy soldiers raising a bayonet over him. Quin shot him. He stumped towards the corporal. 'Are you fatally injured?' he growled, looming over the human.

'I - n - no,' the corporal said. 'Bullet creased my skull.' He probed his head and winced. 'Knocked me for a loop.' He looked up. 'You saved me. Thank you.'

'If you are not fatally injured, why are you sitting?' Quin rumbled. He paused. 'You are welcome.' He holstered his bolt pistol and reached down to help the man to his feet. 'Can you fulfil your duties?'

'Yes,' the corporal said. He fumbled with his weapon. His hands were shaking as he reloaded, but his voice was firm. He bawled out an order, and the men around them began to reform. Quin nodded in approval. They would continue the advance.

'Good. We shall - eh?' The boom of artillery interrupted him. Not from the emplacements. He straightened, searching the horizon. His armour's sensors whirred, trying to isolate the sound and find its point of origin. A familiar ident-rune pinged - Thorn. Then another - Telmar. And finally, Lord Commander Abdemon.

'Looks like the lord commander and the others were successful. We've got reinforcements after all.'

Quin smiled in satisfaction as an enemy airship exploded overhead, raining debris down across the battlefield.

'The Phoenician will be pleased.'

Fulgrim made his way across the battlefield, cloak artfully arranged to avoid the worst of the carnage. Part of him was annoyed that he'd chosen to abstain from the cut and thrust, content to let his sons play their parts. He had considered leading a counterattack himself, but thought it best to reffain from revealing his capabilities too early. His absence had emboldened the renegades, encouraging them to commit more of their forces than they might otherwise have done.

Now, what was left of those forces was retreating west, towards the Anabas Mountains. The rest of them were lying scattered across the field, awaiting the final tally. Several thousand, at least, he judged, if the smell were any indication. Caught between the city emplacements and the artillery of the newly faithful patricians, they'd been annihilated in the fullest sense of the word. Barely one man in ten had survived to retreat. Among those survivors were most of the renegade leaders. A few had died - either during the counter-attack, or by their own hands, later.

And one had been taken prisoner.

Bucepholos knelt amid the remains of what had been his command post in the western rail junction terminal. The heavy, square structure loomed over the railroad that linked Nova-Basilos to the westernmost cities. It had been fortified and heavily manned by two hundred crack troops, hardened by the internecine conflicts of the western provinces. Abdemon and the others had taken it in less than an hour.

Those who'd survived knelt in orderly ranks beneath the watchful gazes of soldiers of the continental army, awaiting Fulgrim's judgement. Some would be executed, in a summary act of decimation. The rest would be conscripted and returned to the western provinces, to aid in pacifying the region. No sense in wasting good men, when they could be put to better use elsewhere Their leader, however, could not expect such mercy. An example needed to be made. Fulgrim regretted it, after a fashion. Bucepholos was too troublesome to have ever slotted into place perfectly. He would have

eventually crossed a line, and been dispatched. But he might've been useful in the short term.

'A shame,' Fulgrim murmured, looking down at the patrician. Bucepholos was still fat, but even so he looked shrunken, in his tattered robes and battered body armour. 'They tell me you fought bravely. I did not expect that.'

'And I didn't expect to be kneeling here, in the mud, missing a hand.' Bucepholos held up the stump of his wrist, swathed in red-stained bandages. 'But here we are.'

'Yes' Fulgrim glanced at Abdemon, who stood nearby with the others. 'I thought I gave orders that the patricians weren't to be harmed.' The lord commander frowned, his dark features marked by other people's blood. He glanced at Flavius Alkenex, who shrugged.

'He came at me with a sword,' he said, by way of explanation. 'Ah.' Fulgrim smiled, amused. His other sons displayed the lazy satisfaction of sated predators, their hands resting loosely on their weapons. Five warriors of the Legion, against two hundred men. Fulgrim felt a surge of pride. There was a saga for Russ to choke on, the blustering braggart. 'Well, I suppose it couldn't be helped, then.'

'Does it really matter if I'm in one piece when you kill me?' Bucepholos asked. His voice lacked its former strength. It was a strained rasp of its former self. His face sagged with fatigue and pain, but his eyes were bright.

'No, but I wanted to talk first.' Fulgrim sank to his haunches. Even crouching, he loomed over the patrician. 'Sabazius. You said the name meant nothing to you before. What about now?'

Bucepholos smiled weakly. 'Now... Now, I say it doesn't matter. I have nothing to say to you, monster.'

Fulgrim frowned and rose to his feet. 'There's no call for insults, patrician.'

'I see the truth of you, now,' Bucepholos said. 'You're no better than us, whatever you claim. Just stronger. We grind men in our factories and mills, and you grind them in war. You baited us, allowed us to kill men loyal to you, to Pandion, in order to draw us in. You let the city burn, just so you would have light to load your guns by. Those pretty faces hide an ugliness beneath. I'm glad I won't be here to see what comes next.'

'Perhaps. Then, I gave you a chance to work with me Instead, you decided to make war.' Fulgrim spread his hands. 'This is as much your doing as

mine.'

'You knew we would find your terms unacceptable. You provoked us.'

Fulgrim smiled sadly. 'Yes. And you allowed yourselves to be provoked. Whose fault is the greater? I find myself unable to tell.' He drew *Fireblade* and laid the flat across the fat man's shoulders. 'If it's any consolation, you would have chafed under the yoke of stars, Patrician Bucepholos. And your death here will serve as an example to future generations. For that, I thank you.'

Bucepholos spat. Fulgrim looked down at the gobbet of saliva sliding across his foot. His smile vanished as he lifted his sword. 'Then, maybe it's best if you are forgotten entirely. Your children are suitable candidates for joining my Legion, I believe. Rest assured, I shall induct them personally.'

The patrician paled, his eyes widening. He opened his mouth, to protest perhaps, or plea for mercy, but too late. *Fireblade* fell, and Bucepholos with it. Fulgrim tore a strip from the dead man's robes and used it to clean the blade. He turned to see Fabius making his way towards them. In the smoke, the Apothecary looked even more like an arachnid than usual.

'Ah, Fabius,' Fulgrim called in greeting. 'Patrician Bucepholos has forfeited his rights and properties. We shall isolate his children immediately, and render them to the *Pride of the Emperor* for full gene-implantation.' He paused, considering. 'In fact, do the same for the children of the other patricians we've arrested or otherwise identified as renegades. Let us salvage something from this farce.'

Fabius nodded. 'I shall make the appropriate preparations immediately.' He looked around. 'After I've finished here. There's much to be done'

'Out of your hole for the duration, then, Spider?' Telmar said, laughing. 'Shame you weren't here earlier, to see what real warriors are capable of.'

'I was busy seeing to the wounded,' Fabius said. You know - the mortals torn to pieces while you played at war, like the overgrown child you are.' His armour was covered in reddish stains, and Fulgrim wondered whether the wounded had appreciated the attentions of the Apothecary, or whether they'd have preferred the ministrations of the merely human. He doubted Fabius had bothered to ask either way.

Telmar frowned and reached for his sword. 'I think I have had just about enough of you, Apothecary.' He seemed determined to have his satisfaction. Such fire could be useful, but it had its time and place.

'Chief Apothecary,' Fulgrim corrected, gently. The two Space Marines looked at him. 'I have decided to promote Fabius to a rank equal to his responsibilities. That means that he outranks you, Kasperos. Thus, it is not seemly for you to challenge him, being of lesser rank.' That would settle it, for now. It might even provoke some ambition in Kasperos.

Telmar stared at the primarch. He wrenched his hand away from the hilt of his blade and nodded tersely. 'My apologies, *Chief Apothecary,'* he said.

Fabius ignored him. He looked at Fulgrim. 'I have done nothing to deserve such an honour, my lord,' he said, his voice hollow with weariness. 'My efforts have been... imperfect. Flawed.'

Fulgrim looked down at him. 'And I say that you have earned it.' He looked around. 'We are all imperfect,' he said slowly. He knew he must choose his words carefully. Whatever was said here would filter back through the Legion, one way or another. The wrong word, and all that he had so carefully rebuilt might collapse anew. 'But perfection is a process. It is the fruit of the highest branch.' He raised his hand for emphasis. 'That is why we are here, my sons. This world is the beginning of our climb. The fruit sits above us, just out of reach. We will climb until we have it in our grasp. But climb we must, lest our imperfections damn us to mere adequacy.'

The others were nodding now, hesitantly.

'Eight, against the assembled might of a world,' Fulgrim said. 'Leman boasts of eight hundred. Horus, eighty. We shall show the wolves of Luna and Fenris both what true killers look like. Here, in this fire, shall we be reborn. Here, all old sins will at last be forgiven. All failures expunged.' He turned back, meeting Fabius' gaze.

'We approach the final ascent. Let us climb it swiftly, and with grace.'

FIFTEEN

THE HAMMER-STRIKERS

Two Stormbirds sped through the dawn light. Fulgrim waited impatiently in the command compartment of the *Firebird,* watching as the hololithic map of Byzas responded instantly to real-time data-feed uploads. The planetary situation changed for the better with every passing hour, but it wasn't perfect. Not yet.

In the week since Bucepholos' failed coup, the renegade patricians had either surrendered or retreated into the hinterlands. Those who'd surrendered had turned over a third of their property and territorial holdings to the Gubernatorial Throne, and offered up their youngest children as hostages to the 28th Expedition. Continental army troops were currently occupying the lands of the rest. By the time this affair was done, the Hereditary Governor would once again be the most powerful individual on the planet, and the stranglehold the patricians had on Byzas would be broken.

But there was still one final lesson to be taught. And a bloody one, at that.

The renegades had retreated into the Anabas Mountains, seeking the safety

of the crags and hollows. The mountains were dotted with bastions and refuelling stations - a legacy of the wars that had spelled the end of the Gubernatorial Triumvirate, so many centuries ago. One by one, those bastions had been found and eliminated. Continental army airships prowled the skies, and the mountains were burning from the constant rain of phlogiston bombs. Slowly but surely, the renegades had been forced westward.

'The western provinces are in open revolt,' Abdemon said quietly. 'They'll find support there, if you're right about where they've holed up.'

Fulgrim nodded absently. 'I am.' He tapped a point on the map, enlarging the cartographic detail. A red dot flashed. Sabazius-Ut-Anabas. 'It has cultural significance. The walls are thick and high, and its wells are deep. You noted the camouflaged refuelling station set in the crags above the monastery? It was new. The Sabazian Brotherhood have been planning to use it as a staging point for some time, I'd wager. Now, it's the last stop before they retreat across the mountains, to lick their wounds and regroup.'

'I can't believe they'd risk it. We know about it. How can they think it's safe?'

Fulgrim shrugged. 'Simple. They don't. But it's safe enough, if they're only worrying about the continental army.' He glanced at the lord commander. 'Why do you think I've held us back from participating until now?'

Abdemon nodded in understanding. 'If they think you're staying out of it, they won't be expecting us to suddenly show up, without support, and ram our fists down their throats.' He frowned. 'Still - only seven of us. And two Stormbirds. To be fair, I wouldn't expect it either. It seems like suicide.'

'Suicide is for the foolish or desperate. I am neither.' Fulgrim smiled. 'I have been planning this for some time, and now is our moment to strut upon the stage, and show this world, and all the galaxy besides, what we are truly capable of.' He reached out, as if to grasp the dot that represented the monastery and pluck it free of the mountains. 'With this one, perfect blow, we shall humble this world and my brothers both. Then, our work can truly begin. This is the last first step, Abdemon. Are you ready?'

'Born ready, my lord.' Abdemon bowed his head.

'What of the rest of you?' Fulgrim asked, studying the rest of his sons. He'd brought everyone save Cyrius - the swordsman had been left to protect Pandion, despite his protests. While Nova-Basilos was firmly under the

control of the continental army, Fulgrim was not so foolish as to leave the Hereditary Governor completely unprotected. Not this close to the end of things. Even the best-laid plans could be undone by the actions of desperate men. The Emperor's Children had learned that lesson at Proxima.

Kasperos and the others looked every inch the demigods that the Emperor had intended them to be. Even Fabius had polished the gilt of his armour to a blinding gleam. Bandoliers of grenades and extra ammunition were strapped tight across their chest-plates, and their weapons were loose in their sheaths. Each of them was an army unto himself, armed to the teeth and ready for war. He could hear the hum of Quin's power axe, and the whining growl of Fabius' chain blade as it was activated.

The proximity klaxon sounded, and the compartment was bathed in crimson light. Fulgrim banished the hololith and stood. 'Now, at last, we come to it. I claim the honour of first blood. Unless anyone has any objections?'

No one did. Fulgrim smiled and pulled on his helmet. He drew *Fireblade* and strode to the hatch. The seals hissed flat and the hatch popped open without protest. Wind howled into the compartment, tugging at his limbs and cloak. He ignored it and stepped into the opening. The mountains sprawled below, like a stretch of scar tissue on the body of some primordial giant. The turrets of Sabazius-Ut-Anabas were just visible, blanketed beneath the shimmering veil of an etherdome. The crackling energy field would hamper the gunship's ability to land. It would have to be destroyed.

Without further thought, Fulgrim leapt from the open hatch of the *Firebird*, eager to come to grips with the shadows that had eluded him since his arrival. They had answered his challenge, fallen into his trap, and now, he would dispose of them.

Perfect.

As he fell towards the monastery, he counted airships. Large ones and small ones, anchored to the highest peaks by tensile cables, waiting to be refuelled and rearmed by the crews of men climbing up and down the craggy paths. He watched as the second Stormbird peeled away from *Firebird* and swooped towards the waiting flock, ignoring the streamers of anti-aircraft fire that streaked upwards to meet it. Its assault cannons opened up, puncturing refuelling tanks and ammunition crates, rather than the vulnerable shapes of the anchored airships. Fire erupted, dancing across the

peaks. It crawled up the cable anchors, stretching flickering talons towards the airships.

The Stormbird banked and began to climb back towards the upper atmosphere as the first airship detonated with a sound like thunder. In moments, the entire fleet was consumed in a firestorm, and Fulgrim turned his attention back to the matter of his descent.

It could, perhaps, be seen as somewhat immature to engage in so rash a tactic as hurling oneself bodily into the heart of the enemy. Especially from such a great height, and at such speed. But there was also a great joy to be had in it.

In the end, for all his tactical and strategic acumen, he was still a primarch. A being such as had never walked the world before, and never would again. He exulted in it. He could bend steel, and survive unaided in a vacuum for hours. And he could do this. For the first time, and the last time, his foes would see a son of the Emperor unleashed. A greater honour he could not imagine. Thus, he folded his arms and let gravity draw him to his target, unresisting.

The arrival of the primarch rocked Sabazius-Ut-Anabas to its foundations. Fulgrim's lean form pierced the crackling energy field of the etherdome with ease, and struck the courtyard like a mortar round. Men were hurled from their feet by the shockwave of his landing. The generators powering the etherdome exploded, filling the lower levels of the monastery with fire and smoke.

Fulgrim rose from the impact crater, his gilded panoply wreathed in smoke. He drew *Firebrand* with his free hand and fired. A running figure burst into flame, explosively burning to ash in moments. *Fireblade* slashed out, removing the head of another. Armoured figures charged through the smoke, heavy carbines growling. Automatic fire stitched across Fulgrim's chest-plate and helmet, doing little more than drawing his attention. He spun, his volkite charger spitting heat.

One of the black-armoured warriors deflagrated, showering his companions with chunks of melted armour and burning meat. Shocked, they froze, and in doing so, sealed their fate. Fulgrim launched himself towards them. *Fireblade* wove a deadly pattern, and the men collapsed, their screams cut short.

Alarms blared, and officers cried out, trying to impose some sense of order

on a situation spinning rapidly out of control. They'd thought their mountain fastness impregnable, and most of their weaponry was directed outwards, awaiting the approach of the continental army. Even if it had been turned inwards, it would have done them little good. Fulgrim was too fast, too deadly.

He raced through the courtyard, leaving a trail of carnage in his wake. Behind him, the *Firebird* was clearing itself a landing zone with its twin-linked heavy bolters. With the etherdome down, the gunship was free to land unhindered. Abdemon and the others would join him in moments. The thought excited him beyond all measure. He had fought beside his sons before, but this would be the first time he had done so without one of his brothers looking over his shoulder.

Fulgrim pivoted, kicking a soldier in the chest. Armour and bone crumpled as the limp figure was flung backwards to slam into a column. A bayonet shattered against his war-plate. Fulgrim back-handed its wielder, snapping his neck. They were nothing. Nothing. Where was the challenge here?

An anti-infantry weapon opened up from a nearby archway, and he staggered as the heavy-calibre slugs punched into him. Wincing, he pressed forward, ignoring the impact alarms that echoed loudly in his ears. The gunner was screaming curses as he depressed the rotating barrels, trying to halt Fulgrim's advance. The loader scrambled backwards, courage broken. Fulgrim caught hold of the barrel and shoved it aside, ripping the gun from its frame. He sank *Fireblade* into the gunner's chest, released the hilt, and finished tearing loose the gun. The grip was laughably small in his hand, but he easily got a finger around the trigger. It was a primitive weapon, barely deserving of the name, but it would serve.

Fulgrim turned, spraying the courtyard and those forces attempting to muster there. The weapon twisted in his grip like a petulant child until, at last, its ammunition drum ran dry. He tossed it aside and reclaimed *Fireblade*. Slugs whinged off his armour, ricocheting into the unlit recesses of the archway. As he ducked beneath the archway and into the monastery, his internal augurs scanned his surroundings, seeking his prey.

He'd keyed his sensors to the specific life-readings of those members of the patricians, as well as the members of the Sabazian Brotherhood with whom he'd come into contact. He could track them across the planet if he so chose. Some of them he would doubtless have to. But others had obligingly

gathered themselves here. There was an old saying on Terra: cut off the head, and the body will die.

It had all been so artfully arranged. Perfect in its execution. He had forced the disparate factions into a single coalition. Many enemies had become one. And now he would behead that one, and end this revolt at a single stroke.

Perfect.

Fulgrim smiled a tiger's smile as he paced through the corridors. He followed the electronic scent down curving stone steps, and through chambers that had been carved by the hands of the faithful. At any other time, he might have paused to study the mosaics that marked the walls and floors of these chambers. He might have examined the delicate carvings that wound around the pillars. Instead, he ignored them. There would be time for such things later. Perhaps he would even have the monastery broken down and rebuilt elsewhere, as a memorial to his triumph. He might even restore the statue of Sabazius, which now lay broken in the courtyard above.

All these thoughts passed through his mind as he descended. The vox crackled with the voices of his sons, and his helmet's vid-feed showed him flashes of the massacre above. The Emperor's Children fought pragmatically, using the fire and manoeuvre tactics they'd developed campaigning alongside the Luna Wolves to good effect. He cycled through the feed, leaping from one to the next - he saw Quin press forward, into the teeth of the enemy's suppressive fire, holding their attention as Alkenex raced across a parapet above, thumbing the activator switch on a grenade.

Dust sifted down as the grenade tore apart flesh and stone alike. Would anything be left, when he returned to the surface? Abdemon's voice - stem and unyielding - surged across the vox-link, ordering Kasperos to hold his position. The legionary was singing softly to himself, a classical piece Fulgrim had last heard in the Sonnet-Gardens of Phoenicia, and timing his shots to the song, recreating its rhythm. Fulgrim smiled. No wonder Abdemon was annoyed. Such bursts of creativity were beyond the lord commander, and he lacked the patience to indulge them in others.

Carbines roared in the narrow corridor ahead of him, sharpening his focus. He was close. He plunged on, not slowing. Guards clustered, blocking off the corridor. They crouched behind a line of blast-shields and fired as

quickly as they could work their weapons.

He dove head on into the storm of lead, trusting in his armour. He crashed into the shields, shouldering them aside. Men fell back, yelling unintelligibly. *Fireblade* darted out, and men fell. Fulgrim trod over the wounded as he filled the corridor with a glittering web of darting steel.

One managed to avoid the blade's touch, and sought to halt the primarch's advance with brute strength, wrapping his arms around Fulgrim's waist. Fulgrim stared down at his attacker for a moment, contemplating the sheer, heroic insanity of the attempt. Then, with a laugh, he plucked the man up as if he were a child and cracked his skull against the ceiling of the corridor. Flinging the body aside, he pressed on.

By the time he reached the doorway they'd been guarding, the corridor had been stained red, from floor to ceiling. Fulgrim didn't bother to knock. Instead, he let *Firebrand* announce his arrival. He ducked through the molten archway, easily avoiding the droplets of melted stone that fell steadily to the floor.

The chamber was larger than any of the others he'd passed through above. It was a veritable cathedral of stone pillars and sweeping archways - the very heart of the monastery, he suspected. Were the footsteps of Sabazius buried somewhere beneath the slabs of stone on the floor? He considered asking the crowd of men facing him, but decided against it. It might cheapen the moment.

His targeting array highlighted potential threats - one, two, four, eight, a hundred. A hundred men, scattered throughout the chamber. Waiting for him. 'Well,' he said, his amplified voice echoing through the chamber. 'Here we all are.'

'As you knew we would be.' A Sabazian stepped forward, dressed in black, blade in hand. 'As we knew that you would come.'

'Were you waiting for me, then?' Fulgrim lifted *Fireblade*. 'How civil. But, I'm afraid the time for civility has passed. Now is the time for brute violence. Seas and messes of blood, as the old poets had it. A wine-dark sea, upon which an armada of corpses sails to the underworld.' Fulgrim pointed his sword at the Sabazian. 'That's you, by the way.'

'Perhaps. But we will not make our journey alone.'

Fulgrim laughed. 'Brave words. Then, I expected no less.'

'We showed this place to you for a reason, Phoenician,' the masked figure

continued. 'Show your enemy a weak spot, and he will surely strike.'

The chamber echoed with the rattle of swords, and the harsh clack of weapons being readied. A dozen men or a hundred, it made little difference to Fulgrim. But there was something else. A sound, far below the register of the human ear. A hum. The same one he'd heard before, when he'd first visited the monastery. He'd mistaken it for a generator, then. Now he knew it was something else.

'And you came, as surely as if we had invited you. Never wondering why. Belleros was right. You are a child in a god's body, so eager to prove your superiority that you lose sight of your purpose.'

'Quiet,' Fulgrim said. He closed his eyes, trying to isolate the hum. It was familiar, that particular sound. He'd heard it before - not here. Somewhere else. Terra, perhaps. Memories of an ugly device, resting on one of Ferrus' work-benches, surged to the fore. Ferrus had been showing him how to disarm a-

His eyes sprang open. They wouldn't. They hadn't. An unfamiliar sensation filled him. Not quite fear, but something close. *Firebrand* pulsed in his hand, melting a section of the floor as men scattered. The ancient mosaic laid there trickled away in molten rivulets, revealing a battered mechanism, sealed below. The shape was unfamiliar, but he recognised it regardless. There could be no mistaking such a thing.

An atomic weapon. And it had been activated.

'He's found it! Take him!'

They came at him in a rush, a hundred mortal lives hurling themselves into death. He turned, *Fireblade* sweeping out in a wide arc, painting the air a vibrant crimson. Gunfire thundered through the chamber as he moved among them, trying to clear himself room to get to the atomic device. If he could reach it, he might stand a chance of disarming it. But a wall of bodies prevented him.

They threw themselves at him from all sides, brave men trying to pull down the monster rampaging among them. Did they know? Did they understand? The worst of it was, he thought that perhaps they did. That they had volunteered for this, to sacrifice themselves just to have a chance at killing him. Did they fear him this much? The answer was stamped on every face. And so, he killed them. One after the next, in pairs and trios, by the dozen. *Firebrand* grew warm and white spitting raw heat. *Fireblade*

turned red, and grew heavy with gore. Still they came on. Bullets plucked at his panoply, marring the gilt and tearing his cloak to ragged tatters. He pivoted, chopping through a skull, crown to chin. A kick sent a body flying backwards, to crack against a sagging pillar.

The Phoenician danced and men died. And the dance would have continued, uninterrupted, save for the whim of fate. Blood squelched suddenly underfoot, and Fulgrim stumbled, fighting to hold his balance.

He slid to one knee. A sword crashed down against his helm, and he whipped *Fireblade* out blindly, trying to keep them back, and was rewarded with a scream. Hands caught at him. One man's strength was nothing to him, but the strength of ten or twenty was something else again. Especially when he had no leverage. Someone pressed a pistol to his chest-plate and emptied the cylinder. A useless attempt, but he felt the force of each shot as it reverberated through his chest. 'Off me - get off,' he snarled, infuriated. He forced himself to his feet, casting his attackers aside.

No time. He had no time for this. He spun, hacking, slashing. Trying to break free of the mob. Proximity warnings filled his vision, alerting him to attacks coming from all sides. He fell into an instinctive rhythm, no longer a dancer, but a machine of death. Killing himself a path to his target.

Then, with a suddenness that was startling, the last body thumped to the ground. Fulgrim tore *Fireblade* free of the crumpled corpse He'd dropped *Firebrand* somewhere, but he had no time to search for it.

He staggered towards the atomic weapon, tearing off his helmet as he went. The air tasted foul, like a slaughterhouse on the turn. The hum was louder now, audible even to mortal ears, though none were left to hear it.

He dropped to his knees beside the hole, staring at the digital readout ticking away every second. 'Ferrus, brother, I need your wisdom now,' he muttered. The mechanism was ancient, and far more complex than any of the ones he'd dismantled in Ferrus' workshop, under his brother's watchful gaze. Those hadn't been humming quite so threateningly either. He tried to remember the secrets his brother had showed him. There was always a trick to it - a wire, a panel. But if he touched the wrong thing, there would be no second chances. Only a moment of regret, and the sure, if passing, knowledge that he'd failed. And that, he could not abide.

The hum increased in volume It was building to a crescendo.

No time, now. He lifted *Fireblade* in both hands, and closed his eyes. He

focused on the hum, trying to pinpoint it. When he thought he had it, he struck.

Fireblade pierced the casing. An electrical surge coursed up through the blade, and his muscles locked spasmodically. He screamed, and as the echoes of his cry faded, he realised that he could no longer hear the hum. Carefully, he pulled *Fireblade* free. The glow had faded. The mechanism was dead, or at least disarmed.

Fulgrim sagged back on his heels.

His eyes flashed open. A trap. It had been a trap. The open blade, and the hidden. And he'd walked right into it, as they'd known he would. But why risk it? Unless...

He shoved himself to his feet. Pandion.

He had to get back to Nova-Basilos.

SIXTEEN

The skies above Nova-Basilos were still thick with smoke. Airships hung watchfully in the air above the city, and their shadows crept across the tangled streets, driving people indoors. The city was quiet now, subdued in the wake of all that had occurred. Continental army units patrolled the districts, alert to any signs of resistance to the new order of things. There had been some fighting in the outer districts, and an early morning explosion had rocked the palace grounds.

'Is this really necessary?' Pandion grumbled, as Cyrius hurried them towards the gunship. The third Stormbird waited to take them to the *Pride of the Emperor*. 'You have broken them. The field is ours.' He looked at Pyke. 'You told me I was to stay here.' The old man was drunk, or close. He had been drinking steadily for several hours, in celebration of imminent victory, and Pyke had matched him, glass for glass. But unlike the governor, the iterator was steady on her feet, and clear-eyed.

'And now we are telling you to go,' Pyke said calmly. Pandion glared at her blearily.

'You can't talk to me that way. I'm the governor.'

'Until all rebel elements have been accounted for, we must ensure your safety,' Cyrius said, trying not to let his impatience show. He wished to be fighting alongside his primarch. Something more fitting than looking after someone who had more guards than he obviously needed. How was he to prove himself, trotting after a drunken old man?

Cyrius glanced at the quintet of gubernatorial guards walking in tight formation around them. They were disciplined, but on a knife-edge. Cyrius considered reassuring them, then discarded the idea. It could wait. Getting Pyke and the governor off-world was his priority. Fulgrim's message had been clear enough. Someone had tried to kill the primarch with an atomic weapon. Sabazius-Ut-Anabas had been a trap. And that meant that Pandion might very well be in danger after all. Chancellor Corynth and Lord Commander Frazer would have to hold the city without them.

A shout from behind them caused Cyrius to turn. He saw Chancellor Corynth hurrying towards them, accompanied by a group of courtiers. Among their number were several of the young men who had

unsuccessfully challenged him over the past few weeks. He frowned, puzzled.

'Cyrius,' Pyke said quietly.

'I see them,' Cyrius said. 'What could Corynth want?'

'Cyrius - they're armed,' Pyke hissed.

Cyrius blinked. He'd seen the swords, but hadn't thought about what they'd meant. Armed men weren't allowed in the governor's presence, unless they were his guards. 'Get Pandion to the gunship, Primary Iterator. I'll-'

He was interrupted as one of the gubernatorial guards drew his sidearm and fired. The shot skidded across Cyrius' temple, and he cursed himself for not wearing his helmet. Akurduana would have had stem words for such a display of overconfidence. And Abdemon would have had him on punishment detail.

He spun and drove his fist into the guardsman's chest, punching through the ceremonial cuirass and pulping the man's heart. 'Lady Golconda,' he shouted, as another guardsman chopped at him with a sword. 'Get to the Stormbird!' He raised his forearm and the man's sword shivered to fragments against the ceramite. Cyrius caught him by the throat and swung him into his fellows, dropping them in a tangle. The last man was taking careful aim at Pyke and the governor. Cyrius caught him by the back of the head, and squeezed. The man fell without a sound.

Cyrius drew his sword as the others tried to scramble to their feet. He was faster than they were, and they died, still on the ground. Cyrius turned as a bullet caromed off his shoulder-plate. Chancellor Corynth, a grave look on his face, lowered his smoking weapon. Treachery, then.

He wasted no time wondering how or why. As Corynth's companions raced forward, Cyrius moved to meet them. His confidence turned to confusion as his first blow failed to find its mark. He turned, roaring in anger as sharpened steel thrust through the joins of his armour, piercing seals and hoses. They surrounded him like a pack of wild dogs, stabbing and ducking away. Too late, he remembered Abdemon's warning. They'd learned, these mortals. They'd watched and taken note of the flaws in his style. Another thing Akurduana would chastise him for, if he survived.

He caught one of his attackers with a glancing blow, knocking the man to the ground. Before the swordsman could roll aside, Cyrius stamped down on his chest, killing him instantly. A second broke his blade on Cyrius'

aquila. The Space Marine blinked metal fragments from his eyes, and backed away. He could hear the Stormbird's engines firing, and hoped Pyke had made it. As he rubbed the last of the shrapnel from his eyes, he heard a strange hum. Instinctively, he jerked back. But not far enough.

Corynth drove the humming blade up, into Cyrius' torso. Cut cables spewed coolant as the weapon slid through the ceramite plates and into the flesh beneath. Cyrius gasped and caught hold of Corynth's collar. He flung the chancellor aside and turned his attentions to the blade gnawing at his vitals. He groped at the hilt, trying to pull it out, even as he sank to one knee. Blood stained his hands and the ground as he finally pulled it free and cast it aside.

'Trans-sonic, I think it's called,' Corynth said, quickly retrieving the blade. 'An heirloom, passed down from one generation to the next.' He eyed the blood sizzling on the edge of the sword. 'It cuts through damn near anything. Though I never saw much point in it, until now. Until I faced something a normal blade couldn't harm.' He swept the sword out and extended it towards Cyrius. 'I am sorry for this, my friend. Under different circumstances...'

'Under different circumstances, I'd be the one apologising to you,' Cyrius grunted. He felt as if his internal organs had been liquefied. Everything inside him wanted to spill out through the wound in his torso. Nonetheless, he forced himself to one knee, and then upright. It was not fitting that a legionary should die at a mortal's hands. 'And I still might,' he hissed, between bloody teeth.

Corynth hesitated. Then, he nodded. 'As you wish.' He stepped back, falling into a guard stance. He waved Cyrius forward. 'Come then, legionary.'

Cyrius stooped and retrieved his blade. He looked past Corynth, and saw that the Stormbird was gone. Pyke and the governor were safe Satisfied, he extended his sword. 'You first,' he said.

Corynth slid forward, moving lightly. He was faster than Cyrius had expected. Not inhumanly so, but with the speed of a man who'd been preparing for this moment for some time. Fast and precise And the damage to the seals and joins of Cyrius' armour was slowing him down. Even so, he steadily forced Corynth to retreat. 'You've already lost,' he said. 'Pandion is out of your reach.'

'Who said I was after Pandion?' the chancellor said, backing away. 'He's no more than a puppet of this world's true masters, now.' Corynth extended his blade. 'You. You and your Phoenician. Immortal, unkillable. But you can die. And you'll die at the hands of a mere human. The message will go out, and this world will turn on you like the invaders you are.' He gestured with his free hand, and the rest of his men closed ranks on Cyrius. 'We will be free of our shackles, as Sabazius intended.'

They came in a rush. Cyrius staggered, defending himself as best he could with one hand. Even hampered as he was, he was more than a match for them. But every time he managed to drive them back, Corynth was there, his trans-sonic blade darting in to draw blood. Cyrius knew he was being whitded down, a bit at a time. They had his measure. He considered the bolt pistol on his hip, but discarded the idea even as it occurred to him. He refused to be forced to resort to such means. He would match them blade to blade, or die where he stood. Better an honourable death than to live knowing he had been defeated by a gaggle of mortals. But with every passing moment, that death seemed more certain.

Then, salvation.

'Belleros.'

The voice of a god, passing judgement. Cyrius turned, and felt relief flood him.

Fulgrim strode across the rooftop landing zone, and Corynth's surviving warriors retreated before his approach. The primarch's armour was chipped and blackened in places. Dried blood caked it, dulling the gleam of the gold, and his cloak was nothing more than sodden tatters. He wore no helmet, and his white hair was loose, spilling across his shoulders like a mane. He stopped beside Cyrius, and looked down at him. 'Cyrius. It seems I got here just in time.'

Cyrius bowed his head, the shame worse than any pain he felt.

Fulgrim laughed softly. 'No matter. Rest easy, Cyrius. You have done well.' He stepped past him and continued towards Corynth and the others, *Fireblade* held low. He raised the blade in a salute. 'Come then, Belleros. You've beaten the son... Now let us see how you fare against the father.'

Corynth stared at him. 'You should be dead.'

Fulgrim shrugged. He had returned as quickly as he could, hoping to reach Nova-Basilos before the worst happened. Thankfully, *Firebird* was faster

than any normal gunship. 'I am rarely what people think I should be. Instead, I am what I must be. Such is the Phoenix's nature.' He faced Corynth. 'Still, an admirable stratagem. You sacrificed an army, and all just to kill me.' He gestured. 'I survived, obviously.'

'Obviously,' Corynth said.

Fulgrim frowned. 'Why, Belleros?'

'You know the answer to that. You have proven yourself a tyrant equal to the one who created the Glass Waste, Fulgrim. I - we - could not allow our world to fall into the hands of one willing to burn it to ashes, just to claim it. Better Pandion than that.' Corynth shook his head. 'Pandion, the patricians... they are a cancer. Eliminating them was the only way to save Byzas. But you - you are worse.'

'And if you had succeeded, what then? Would the Sabazian Brotherhood have emerged from the shadows, and stepped into power?'

'No, but we would have ensured that the right people did.' Corynth wiped sweat from his eyes. 'Our aims are yours. Our goals are yours. Why could you not work with us?'

'I do not work with fools, even pleasant ones,' Fulgrim said. 'What you wanted, it was nothing more than anarchy. There is a better way, but you refused to see it.'

'Your way.'

'Obviously.'

Corynth shook his head. 'Pride, then? Is that the only reason?'

'Not pride,' Fulgrim said. *Fireblade* drifted forward, tentatively. Corynth leapt back, slapping the blade aside. Fulgrim shrugged. 'Or, rather, not simply pride. You fight for a dream that can never be,' he said. 'A shame, for it is a beautiful dream. But dreams are useless things, when it comes to building something of worth. Something perfect.'

'You don't believe that,' Corynth said. 'If you did, you would not be here.'

Fulgrim smiled. 'What I believe is of little consequence. Only the harsh reality matters. And that reality is this - you cannot kill me. You will not rule this world, for good or ill. If you had come to me first...'

'We did, Fulgrim. And you denied us.'

Fulgrim frowned. 'Not the Brotherhood, Belleros. *You'*. He raised *Fireblade*. 'I gave you the opportunity, that first night. All you had to do was seize it, and none of this would have been necessary.

'I told you then, I do not care who rules. Only that they rule as I see fit.'

Corynth stared at him. Then he began to laugh. Softly at first, but more loudly as it went on. It was Fulgrim's turn to stare, and as Corynth continued to laugh, he began to grow angry. 'Stop laughing,' he snapped. 'Are you mad?'

'Not mad,' Corynth said. 'Disappointed.' He looked up at the towering, glowering primarch and smiled sadly. 'I was right. You never understood at all, did you? All our teachings, all our wisdom, and what did you learn? A few duelling techniques.'

Fulgrim shook his head. 'What else is there?'

'The true duel is within. The battle between desire and purpose, between what you wish, and what must be. And you lost, before you even picked up your blade.'

Incensed, Fulgrim took a step towards Corynth. 'What do you mean?'

'You desire to prove your superiority, above all else. You provoked a war, where you could have engineered peace, simply to root out any potential threat to your authority. To prove your might. That is the nature of your tyranny. And as long as we remain, we will have no choice but to challenge you.' Corynth looked at his sword, and then tossed it aside. 'Desire and purpose,' he said simply. 'You lost. And maybe we did as well. Maybe we should have bent knee. Maybe you are not the only one who allowed yourself to be blinded by pride.'

'Pick it up,' Fulgrim demanded. 'Belleros - pick up your sword.' Corynth sank to his knees and folded his hands. One by one, the others did the same. They cast aside their weapons and knelt behind their leader. 'What do you intend for my world, Fulgrim? Will you do all that you have promised?'

'I - Belleros, pick up your damn sword.' Fulgrim looked at the others. 'Get up, all of you. Stand up.'

Corynth bowed his head, exposing the back of his neck. The others followed suit. 'Will you bring light to the shadows? Will you raise our people up from the mire?'

'Belleros,' Fulgrim said, comprehension dawning even as his anger faded. 'Get up, Belleros. It does not have to be this way.'

'Will you do all these things?' Corynth's voice was steady. Serene. 'Will you break our chains and free our people? Will you save Byzas from itself, as you saved Chemos?'

For the first time, *Fireblade* felt heavy in Fulgrim's grip. He looked down at the chancellor. At the traitor. 'I will,' he said.

'Will you swear it?'

'I swear it, on my honour, as commander of the 28th Expedition, and son of the Emperor, I will save Byzas from itself.' Fulgrim said the words so quietly, he wondered at first if Corynth had heard them. Then he saw the smile twitch at the corners of the man's mouth, and knew he had.

'Perfection,' Corynth said. He closed his eyes. 'Strike, Phoenician. Strike and may your desire be fulfilled, at last.'

Fulgrim struck.

The war for Byzas ended.

SEVENTEEN

'Well, that's it, then. A toast, to your triumph, Lord Fulgrim.' Pyke held up her glass and emptied it. The wine was from the Hereditary Governor's private cellar. The Primary Iterator seemed to have developed a taste for the bitter vintage.

Fulgrim acknowledged the gesture with a nod, and went back to examining the sword Corynth had nearly killed Cyrius with. He held the edge of the trans-sonic blade up to the light and studied it. It was a beautiful weapon, forged on Terra in the early days of Old Night. He wished he could ask Corynth about its pedigree.

He paused. He wished he could ask Corynth many things. Too late now. He lowered the blade and looked around. The gardens were silent. Even the birds were quiet. Soldiers were unobtrusively stationed nearby, waiting to escort them to the throne room.

Pandion would be there, coming to grips with his newfound authority. Today, as part of the compliance ceremonies, he was to publicly pardon the families of those members of the patricians who had risen against him. He had resisted, at first, but Fulgrim had pointed out the obvious merits of such a reconciliation. The aristocracy had long memories, and a reputation for benevolence would serve a man like Pandion better than an iron fist.

It would also buy his heirs enough consideration to keep them safely on the throne, until the new status quo had been established. Once the bureaucrats arrived from Terra, and the Great Crusade passed on, things would begin to change.

That was the hope, at any rate. 'I called our mission here an anabasis,' he said idly. 'A march inland. The reverse is a katabasis - a march to the sea. The victors return to their ships, leaving change in their wake'

'And is that what you have done?' Pyke asked, pouring herself another glass of wine.

'Not so much as I might like, but some. The sickness which afflicted this world has been ameliorated somewhat.'

'Like pus drained from a boil.'

Fulgrim laughed. 'Exactly.' He swept Belleros' sword out and made a graceful lunge. 'Lanced by a perfect thrust.' Even as he said it, he felt a

twinge of something - guilt, perhaps. Or regret. As with the Sulpha on Chemos, he had been forced to eradicate the Sabazian Brotherhood in order to save Byzas. It did not sit well with him, but he did not see how it could have been otherwise.

Or was it simply that he did not *wish* to see it?

The thought brought him up short. Desire and purpose. Which had driven him? Had Belleros been right? Did it even matter? In victory, his superiority was proven. Messages of congratulations were already coming in, some more grudging than others. He had succeeded. He had proven himself. Proven the superiority of his Legion. But still, he thought of the kneeling assassins, waiting patiently for his blade, and wondered.

'Hindsight is wonderful for smoothing the rough edges, isn't it?' Pyke's question struck him like a fist. He looked at her.

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

'Hardly perfect, was it? How many thousands dead? How much destruction?' The questions were pointed, and the same ones he'd been asking himself. Fulgrim felt a flash of irritation. Did she think he was not aware of the cost?

'Its perfection is obvious. Compliance was achieved, and stability ensured. In a few weeks, with barely a handful of warriors, I accomplished what would have taken my brothers months, and hundreds - if not thousands - of warriors.' It was a boast, but a truthful one. He lowered the trans-sonic blade, quieting its hum. 'I have acquired a new world for the Imperium, at minimal cost, and a new source for potential aspirants for my Legion. More, I have proven my ability to any who might doubt it.'

'Or maybe you've proven that they were right all along.'

Fulgrim shook his head, annoyed. 'If that's the case, then there is nothing that will convince them otherwise.'

Pyke frowned. 'I've been reading those Sabazian treatises you found,' she said, indicating the books scattered on the table before her. 'Desire and purpose and all that. It makes for an interesting look into the mind of our late enemies. There's much to be learned from them.'

'I have already seen to it that their martial teachings are integrated into our combat training. It will prove invaluable to my warriors, of that I have no doubt.' That they'd almost carved Cyrius out of his armour was proof enough of that.

'And their philosophy?'

Fulgrim hesitated. 'What of it?'

Pyke sighed and picked up one of the books. '"The search for perfection is a subtle drug,"' she read. '"It draws the mind along circuitous routes, deeper and deeper into itself, until nothing can be seen except the ideal. Desire blinds one to purpose, and thus renders true perfection impossible."'

'But is attainment of the ideal not worth such a torturous journey?' Fulgrim said. 'Only through desire can perfection be imagined, and attained.'

'Some would say that the journey itself is more important.'

'Some have more patience than me.'

Pyke acknowledged the point. 'Then you must ask yourself this - is the ideal you seek worth the cost?' She hesitated. 'This could have all gone very wrong, Fulgrim. You were almost killed at Sabazius-Ut-Anabas, whether you admit it or not. You let your pride blind you, and walked into a trap designed to kill a demigod.'

'And I walked out again,' Fulgrim said softly. He didn't look at her.

'But Cyrius almost didn't. Corynth and his fellows almost killed him.'

Fulgrim turned. 'Casualties are the price of victory.'

Pyke frowned. 'And that is the very excuse those bureaucrats you so detest use to reason away the neglect of your sons. Their lives were spent like bullets, one after the next, to buy victory after victory. I thought you wanted to find a better way, Phoenician.'

Fulgrim tensed, angry. He looked down at her, so old and frail. A single twitch of his hand would serve to shatter her irrevocably. She could feel his anger - he knew she must. But she did not look away. Pyke was not speaking for herself. She was speaking with the voice of Terra, the voice of Malcador and, ultimately, the Emperor.

Worse, she was not wrong. He had acted foolishly, thinking himself clever. His desire for the perfect thrust had blinded him to the desperation of his enemies. He had left them no choice but to kill him, for the good of their world. The thought of his failure was like acid on his mind. How would his brothers judge him, should they learn of it?

He remembered Corynth, kneeling before him. The serenity of his smile. Had he achieved perfection, in his final moments? The thought haunted Fulgrim. He replayed the moment over and over again in his head, studying it from every angle. Why had Corynth allowed himself to die? Had he too

been proving a point?

In those final moments, had he won the duel, between desire and purpose?

Fulgrim forced the anger down. 'I... misjudged the situation,' he said. 'You are right. My desire to prove myself got the best of me, and I made an error in judgement.' He paused. 'Several, in fact.'

Pyke blinked, surprised. Fulgrim allowed himself a smile. Whatever she thought, she did not quite have the measure of him. His brothers might internalise their flaws, but only by admitting his own would he achieve the perfection he sought.

'Desire and purpose,' he said. He tapped the stack of treatises. 'Perhaps you're right about their philosophy as well. It might be the tempering my sons need, if they are to reach their full potential.'

'What now?' she asked after a moment.

'Now?' Fulgrim smiled. 'We have marched inland, and won ourselves a kingdom.' He turned away from her. The war is over.' He looked up, imagining the glories to come. Byzas was but the first. There were worlds without number out there, awaiting the light of his illumination.

'It is time to return to the sea.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR JOSH REYNOLDS IS THE AUTHOR OF THE WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELS *FABIUS BILE: PRIMOGENITOR* **AND** *DEATHSTORM*, **AND THE NOVELLAS** *HUNTER'S SNARE* **AND** *DANTE'S CANYON*, **ALONG WITH THE AUDIO DRAMA** *MASTER OF THE HUNT*. **FOR WARHAMMER AGE OF SIGMAR HE HAS WRITTEN** *HALLOWED KNIGHTS: PLAGUE GARDEN*, *EIGHT LAMENTATIONS: SPEAR OF SHADOWS*, *NAGASH: THE UNDYING KING* **AND** *BLACK RIFT* **AMONGST OTHERS. IN THE WARHAMMER WORLD, HE HAS WRITTEN THE END TIMES NOVELS** *THE RETURN OF NAGASH* **AND** *THE LORD OF THE END TIMES*, **THE GOTREK & FELIX TALES** *CHARNEL CONGRESS*, *ROAD OF SKULLS* **AND** *THE SERPENT QUEEN*. **HE LIVES AND WORKS IN NORTHAMPTON.**

LIBRIS
CUSTODES

An extract from *Angel Exterminatus*.

A small detail, almost inconsequential, but important nevertheless. A creature no larger than a man’s thumb: a winged clade with a segmented carapace and a brittle exoskeleton of variegated puce. Atop its head, whiplike antennae tasted the myriad new scents flavouring the air, moving with uncharacteristic slowness as toxic numbness spread throughout its body.

The creature, a Cordatus vespidae, moved with a drunken gait across the churned red mud of the hillside, buffeted by warring thermals gusting from the earthworks sprawling at its base like a virulent plague. Sky-bound anabatic winds carried the smells of war – burned iron, smoky chemical propellants, musky post-human oils, lubricant and blood.

To any student of xentomology, the creature’s behaviour would have seemed strange to say the least. Its feeder mandibles snapped at nothing and its legs twitched as though rogue impulses were firing from its tripartite brain along its nerve stems, like a palsy. Its hive-nest had once been situated in the waving branches of a tall polander tree, but shell-fire had long since reduced the stepped banks of agri-terraces to a cratered wasteland of splintered stumps.

Fire had gutted the nest’s interior and killed the hive-queen, though residual traces of excreted pheromone resins had been strong enough to guide the vespidae back home. Whether pure instinct or a desire to die within its former home had driven the creature to ascend the muddy ridges of the hillside would never be known, but whatever ambition had driven it

to complete its upward odyssey was to be thwarted. Its body finally succumbed to the paralysing toxin, injected with a murderer's thoroughness, and the vespidae ceased its upward climb. It sat unmoving on a flattened berm of earth beneath a shattered terrace of reflective stone. Jutting lengths of rusted steelwork radiated from the wall, like spread fingers with the ends burned black.

The creature appeared to be dead, but its belly and flanks still rippled with motion. Its head bulged and swelled as its internal structure seemed to rove within its exoskeleton with a frantic desire to reshape itself. Wriggling motion shook its carapace, undulant pressure bending its flexible segments outwards as though they sought to fly away and abandon its dying form. A chitinous plate detached from the creature's body and beneath it writhed a gelatinous, worm-like extrusion, a parasitic passenger sating its newborn hunger by feasting on its host's internal organs.

The cannibalising organism pulled itself from the shell of its birth vessel, its flesh already hardening in the air. From translucency to opacity in a heartbeat, its rapidly forming carapace was a riot of shimmering hues, a wondrous oil spill of colours designed to beguile and entrance. The cracked and husked-out remains of its vespidae host crumbled under the weight of the growing creature, its morphogenesis progressing at a staggering rate.

From a split along the middle, gossamer wings unfolded, dragonfly-long in proportion to its body and edged with a membranous web of trailing cilia. With its wings beginning to beat, a segmented tail of shimmering gold and jet unfolded from beneath the cuckoo creature to give it perfect symmetry.

Though its birth had been horrific and needlessly cruel, its final form was undeniably beautiful. An elegant swan hatched from a bloody carcass, a reminder that even the most terrible cruelty can fashion the greatest beauty.

An iron-shod boot slammed down, crushing the newborn creature into the mud beneath its tread. Brutal proof – if proof were needed – that the living world existed with no thoughts of compassion, justice or mercy.

The owner of the boot, clad in the hulking plates of Cataphractii Terminator armour, stared at the smoke-wreathed mountain and the golden citadel crowning its summit. Unaware of the tiny life he had just snuffed out, Forrix scanned the blasted terraces of the Cadmean Citadel, grudgingly admiring the elegance with which it had been integrated into the local

topology and the surrounding city. The warmasons of the Imperial Fists were cold and efficient, but their master understood the first maxim of the victor: that the best people to leave in the wake of your campaigns were those who did not feel they had been conquered.

It was a maxim to which the Iron Warriors paid little heed.

‘The conqueror makes fair his walls, and all should welcome him as a liberator,’ said Forrix, looking back over his shoulder to the wide valley below. Sawtooth fortifications surrounded the citadel in jagged layers of razorwire and pugnacious walls, bludgeoning their way across the lower town and tearing through habitations, agriculture, industry and places of wondrous natural beauty with equal aplomb. Redoubts, bunkers, and high-walled donjons grew like rocky stalagmites in a dripping cave, and a pall of smoke hung low over the dusty red valley like a shroud.

The lower reaches of the promontory at the heart of the great starport were now clad in metal, each dawn revealing a higher course of steelwork and scaffolds that crept uphill like a spreading cancer that would climb and climb until the red-and-ochre skin of the mountain was entirely encased. Freshly laid funicular rails came with the steelwork, heavy-gauge tracks that would allow mighty bombards and howitzers to be raised into battery positions hacked into the stepped bedrock. Thus far the Basilisk workhorses of the siege train had shouldered the bulk of the barrage work, but the heavier guns were only days away from being brought high enough to lob fat cauldrons of high explosive into the heart of the citadel.

And when that happened, it was all over.

No fortress could long resist when the lords of the artilleryman’s craft were brought to bear. The Iron Warriors would flatten Dorn’s mountain and erase all trace of the Cadmean Citadel, heedless of the technological marvels worked into its walls.

Forrix watched the progress of a group of captured city folk hauling long lengths of steel-wound cable uphill, sweating and bloodied by the effort and driven by the whips of Obax Zakayo. Behind them, clawed and spider-limbed construction engines drilled into the mountain to lace its structure with the bolts, fasteners and clamps required of the siegemasters behind them. There was a relentless and pleasing regularity to the work, a dance of logistics, effort and planning that only those versed in the arts of making and unmaking fortifications could appreciate. Amid the brutality, the

slavery, the misery and the rape of the landscape there was art and there was beauty of a strange, under-appreciated kind.

‘Admiring your handiwork again, triarch?’ said Barban Falk, climbing into the shielded observation post below the ruined outwork that marked the point where the Imperial Fists had first broken the earth of this world.

‘No, admiring theirs,’ he replied, jerking his head uphill. Smoke hung over the citadel, its walls pocked and scarred by shell-fire, but already wreathed in a haze of ancient mechanisms of self-repair. Driving dust squalls and oppressed sunshine rippled in the mirage of its void shields, throwing up splintered rainbows of distorted light.

‘You always did like living dangerously, didn’t you, Forrix?’ said Falk, the enormous bulk of their armour filling the small space.

Forrix didn’t have to ask what he meant.

Since the debacle at Phall, to speak of the sons of Dorn with anything other than hate was to invite terrible retribution from the Lord of Iron. Had it been anyone else, Forrix wouldn’t have spoken, but as far as any Iron Warrior ever trusted another, he trusted Barban Falk.

‘I know you think the same,’ he said.

‘True, but I know better than to voice it.’

‘You always played the politics better than I did,’ admitted Forrix.

‘Yet you hold a position in the Trident and have the ear of the primarch.’

‘Precious few of us can claim that now,’ said Forrix, with an honesty that surprised him.

Falk shrugged, no easy feat in such a bulky suit of armour. His monstrous Terminator plates were chevroned with gold and jet, and the smoothness of the heavy, barrel-vaulted pauldrons was in stark contrast to the war-worn condition of Forrix’s armour. Falk’s battle gear had originally been crafted for Warsmith Dantioch of the 51st Expedition, but after the triple disasters of Gholghis, Stratopolae and Krak Fiorina it had been reassigned to a more deserving wearer. Like Phall, no Iron Warrior now mentioned Dantioch. His legacy was utterly expunged; his name a byword for failure on an epic scale.

‘I do not claim to understand our master’s mind, but I can read the tides of his anger,’ said Falk, flexing the chisel-like fingers of his power fist, as though carefully weighing his next words. ‘Tides that grow ever stronger and more frequent.’

‘How are the western approaches?’ asked Forrix, unwilling to address Falk’s comment.

Falk chuckled. ‘Do you think I am trying to entrap you, Forrix?’ said the giant warrior, running a hand over his oil-dark hair and narrowing his already hooded eyes. ‘You think I seek to goad you into careless words I can then report back to the primarch? If I had any feelings to be hurt, they would be bleeding to death right now.’

Forrix allowed himself a thin smile. ‘No, I don’t think that,’ he said.

‘Well you should,’ said Falk. ‘I’d betray you in a heartbeat if I thought it would earn me a place in the Trident. Especially now that Golg’s a corpse and Berossus is as good as a corpse and isn’t likely to be elevated.’

‘Complete the western approaches in the next day and you might get your wish.’

Falk nodded and pulled a waxy sheet of rolled parchment from the kilt of baked leather at his waist. He passed it to Forrix, who pulled it open and cast his eye over Falk’s schematics.

‘The work is proceeding as planned,’ said Falk, his pride and vaunting ambition plain. ‘The breaching batteries will be in place by sundown tonight, and ground-penetrating auspex readings suggest a wall density that will require a sixteen-hour bombardment to carve a practicable breach in the half-moon bastion.’

Forrix let his eyes wander the interleaved lines on Falk’s plans, the angles of approach, the interlocking fire pockets, the dead zones and the enfilading redoubts; admiring the brutal functional architecture of his fellow warsmith’s plans.

‘I see you favour extra storm bastions over breaching batteries,’ he said.

Falk had always preferred the blunt directness of frontal assault over the relentless mathematics of a carefully planned approach. Where Forrix viewed the reduction of a fortress as a rigorously applied equation, Falk saw it as a pugilistic battle where both fighters pounded until one was forced to yield.

An unsubtle mindset, but an effective one.

Many beyond the Legion believed this to be the Iron Warriors only means of waging war, but the Lord of Iron was far more subtle than that. Mathematics and the precise application of force made up the bulk of his campaigning, but the brute application of violence made far more dramatic

remembrance.

‘There are enough guns to bring the walls down, even allowing for those damned repair mechanisms,’ replied Falk. ‘Once the wall’s down, I want enough warriors in place to be sure of punching through the breach. They won’t be expecting an escalade in the west.’

‘There’s a reason for that,’ pointed out Forrix. ‘The ground there is steeper and rockier than the other flanks. It won’t be easy to cover that ground quickly enough to avoid getting shot to pieces. And if there are seismic charges in place, they’ll bury you.’

‘There won’t be.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘The Lord of Iron says there will not be.’

‘You have spoken to the primarch?’ asked Forrix, struggling to mask the bilious jealousy flaring in his breast. ‘He has not emerged from his bunker since we made planetfall.’

‘He sends word through the Stonewrought,’ spat Falk, referring to Soltarn Vull Bronn, a warrior of the 45th Grand Battalion whose understanding of stone was such that some whispered it spoke to him, confiding its secrets and opening up its geological wonders to the touch of his entrenching tool. Perturabo, ever quick to recognise raw talent, now favoured Vull Bronn, despite the inferiority of his rank next to the three exalted warsmiths of the Trident who normally attended upon him.

‘Does he send word of the Third Legion?’

Falk shook his head. ‘No, he demands only that Cassander’s men must all be dead and this citadel in ruins before the Phoenician’s warriors arrive.’

Forrix grunted, his measure of the Emperor’s Children’s worth wordlessly expressed. ‘This prosecution will be done with long before then.’

As if to underscore Forrix’s words, the percussive drumbeat of artillery fire echoed from the far side of the mountain. Both warriors looked up as the echoes were carried away by the hot winds whipping around the mountainside. Forrix listened to the rhythm of the guns, as a maestro listens to the orchestra at his command, reading the subtle shifts in pitch and timbre of each weapon. He heard the urgency in the firing and the haste with which each gun was unleashing its explosive ordnance.

‘It’s coming from the north,’ said Forrix, reaching for the helmet mag-locked to his armour.

‘Harkor’s warriors,’ replied Falk.

‘Come on,’ said Forrix, turning and stalking from the observation post.

‘That’s not breaching fire,’ said Falk, arriving at the conclusion Forrix had already reached.

‘No,’ agreed Forrix. ‘The bloody fool’s mounting an escalade.’

Pain. It always came back to pain.

Berossus’s last memory had been of pain, of his life bleeding out through the broken meat-puppet his flesh had become. Bones smashed beyond the ability of any Apothecary to knit, organs pulped with seismic force and the searing heat in his flesh as the fearsome power of his genhanced metabolism tried in vain to undo the mortal wound done to him.

The pain was intense and had never left him, but worse than the pain was the shame of *how* he had been wounded. Not at the hands of an enemy warrior capable of wreaking harm on a battle-engineered post-human, nor at the hands of a terrible alien creature too hideous and nightmarish for him to overcome.

No, this pain had been wrought by the hands of his primarch.

The blow had been swift, too swift to avoid, and too thorough in its unmaking of his body for him ever to recover. Another had swiftly followed, an unnecessary blow, for he was already dead by any conventional measure of the word. But the IV Legion never did anything half-heartedly, and Perturabo’s attack was that martial philosophy distilled into two swift strikes.

Gulping blood down his ruptured oesophagus and frothing it out through his perforated lungs, Berossus had waited to die as he had lived. Embittered and in pain.

Ever since the war against the Black Judges and the screaming mob of hooded Accusators that had caught him off guard he had lived with pain. Individually, the Accusators were no match for a warrior of the Legiones Astartes, but he had been surrounded by a dozen, each armed with a chain-gavel that could cut armour apart with lethal ease.

Six died before they could touch him, but then their blows began to tell, cutting him apart piece by piece until the tearing teeth of an enemy weapon had all but ripped through his spine. He’d killed them all with the last of his strength before falling to the ground as his legs failed him. The

Apothecaries had found him surrounded by their black-hooded bodies and worked wonders on his injured flesh. His body was remade and strengthened with augmetics and nerve grafts, but the pain of the ordeal never left him.

That pain had been eclipsed in one moment of incautious speaking. It had been his misfortune to bring ill-favoured news to the Lord of Iron, whose volatile moods had steadily worsened since the slaughters of Isstvan V. He had known his news was bad, but had hoped his position as a warsmith would keep him from harm.

A foolish hope, for Perturabo's rages fell on high kings and holy fools alike.

Since then, blackness for the most part.

Muttered voices, sudden stabbing light and a sensation of floating, disembodied on a dark ocean. He felt dislocated, adrift and bereft of all the points of reference he had, until now, taken for granted. Berossus had tried to listen to the beat of his heart, thinking that if he could cling to that metronomic beat then he might have some means, however transitory, of measuring the passage of time. Yet his heart was silent, and in his timeless madnesses he would often wonder if he had died and was trapped in some heathen limbo. He rejected the thought, but it would return to plague him often, a nagging suspicion that his life was over, yet would not end.

Memories intruded as he floated between life and death, a parade of conquest in service of the Emperor and, latterly, Warmaster Horus. He saw wars fought in the red rain, dug through the flesh of countless worlds, and ripped the meat from the bones of a hundred thousand foes. He saw righteous wars of species survival, fought by the light of Terra's sun, twist under the transformative pressure of time, becoming wars of conquest, which in time became wars fought for the sake of the vicarious thrill of it.

When had that happened?

How had the martial traditions of the Iron Warriors been perverted so completely?

Berossus knew the answer well enough. Piece by piece, inch by inch, the Emperor's wars had worn the proud warriors of the IV Legion down to little more than grinding machines bedecked in the blood and mud of the worlds they dragged into compliance. Perturabo's warriors had done all that had been asked of them and their only reward was to be thrown back to the very

wars that were poisoning the heart of their Legion.

And then, the bitterest pill to swallow…

Berossus remembered the words Warmaster Horus had spoken to the Lord of Iron after the wrack of lost Olympia and the news that the wolves of Fenris had been loosed upon the fair isle of Prospero.

‘The use of force alone is a temporary solution,’ Horus had said. ‘It may subdue for a moment, but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again. And the Imperium will not be at peace if we must perpetually reconquer those we have rendered compliant. You, my brother, will ensure that *one* conquest is enough.’

Perhaps the Warmaster’s words had been intended as a balm for Perturabo’s tortured soul, but so dark a benediction had only driven him deeper into abyssal guilt. What might once have appeared as the basest of treacheries now seemed like the only logical course, and Perturabo had reaffirmed his oaths of loyalty to Horus.

No one knew what else had passed between these two demigods, but when the Iron Warriors had set foot on Isstvan V, it was with a murderous rage that could only be quenched in the blood of those they had once called brothers.

Berossus floated through the chaos of the massacre on the black sand, the savage joy he had taken in the shock of betrayal on the faces of every midnight-skinned Salamander and ivory-faced Raven Guard. Of the Iron Hands, he had seen little, for the Phoenician’s warriors were making sport of them, their debaucheries unseemly but effective.

He remembered killing a Salamanders captain with a close-range blast of his meltagun, relishing the irony of ending his life with fire. The warrior’s helmet had run molten from his face, leaving the skull exposed and as black as the skin that sloughed from the bone like hot oil. Even as he died, the warrior had cursed him in a bubbling series of liquid gasps that made no sense. He’d left the Salamander to choke on his own liquidised flesh, dismissing the curse as a vestigial remnant of his upbringing on a feral world of savage-born reptile hunters.

Drifting in this timeless limbo of pain and isolation, the Salamander’s molten visage returned to haunt his nightmares, a leering skull with coal-red eyes that bored into him with accusatory force. The screaming skull never left him, braying meaningless static and pressing close to his awareness,

forcing him to relive the agonies it had known in its final moments.

Behind the skull was another face, a bitter granite-carved mask with cold, blue-steel eyes and a voice before which all else was white noise. It commanded the blackened bone of the Salamander, telling it that Berossus would not die as everything else had died. Even in his disembodied state, Berossus knew these were commands that could not be ignored.

The Salamander's skull brought life, but most of all it brought pain, its red eyes reducing him to scraps with chanted evocations. Berossus tried to retreat from its calls, but it had strength beyond what was left to him and a hunger for his suffering.

He felt a jolt of screaming agony course around his body, a shuddering paroxysm of electric rebirth, and even as dimensions of space and form coalesced around him he loosed a shuddering roar as he felt the immense power in his limbs.

The world of darkness in which he had existed for what felt like an eternity was washed away in a cascade of painful colours that made him want to close his eyes. The colours bled away, but not his rage, and he shook as he saw the Salamander's red-eyed skull before him.

Except it wasn't a Salamander and it wasn't a skull.

The Techmarine's eye lenses were whirring optics, enlarged orbs of clicking armatures and rotating ruby lenses mounted on a bulbous apparatus of bronze and silver. His helm was blackened iron and a trio of hissing pneumatics crouched at his shoulders like obedient stingers of metal and dripping fluids.

'Who are you?' he said, his voice a grating bark that sounded nothing like he remembered.

'I am Galian Carron, and you are in my war-forge,' said the Tech-marine, who stepped back with a wary flinch as Berossus shook in the unbreakable fetters that bound him. Carron was looking up at him, for he was taller by far than the Techmarine. Grey-fleshed servitors and heavy lifter gear stood around him, some before him, some behind him – though how he could see them was, at present, a mystery. A host of robed acolytes bearing oiled platters, upon which were a variety of cogs, gear and machine parts knelt behind Carron; the Techmarine's devotees.

No, not Carron's devotees.

His.

‘Why am I here?’ asked Berossus, feeling unfamiliar walls of cold iron pressing in around him, a life-preserving womb and a sarcophagus all in one. Claustrophobic madness extended a tendril into his mind, and found itself welcome.

‘You are here because the Lord of Iron willed it so,’ said Carron.

‘You lie,’ said Berossus, desperate and yet hopeful. ‘He killed me.’

‘No, he has transformed you.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Berossus.

‘By his own hand he has remade you in his image,’ said Carron as one of his wheezing pneumatics reached up and took hold of a rubberised control box. At the press of a button, the fetters binding Berossus’s limbs unclamped with a mechanised sound of grinding metal. His legs, twin columns of iron, steel and fibre-bundle muscles were his again to command, and he took a ponderous step forwards, knowing, with his first, that there would be no release from this entombment in an iron coffin.

The sound of his splay-clawed footfalls rang from the floor plates of the war-forge with a boom of metal on metal. His arms, a monumental hammer and a heavy-barrelled rotor cannon spun in time with his thoughts.

‘I am alive?’ asked Berossus, not yet ready to believe it.

‘Better,’ said Carron. ‘You are a Dreadnought.’

Holding the citadel had never been a possibility, Captain Felix Cassander of the Imperial Fists knew, but that had never been the point. The Iron Warriors were the enemy, and though his thoughts still balked at the thought of the Legiones Astartes turning upon one another, the enemy had to be fought.

Yes, the citadel must eventually fall, but Cassander did not hold with the notion of the unwinnable fight, the noble last stand or poetic notions of self-sacrifice. There was always a way to win or at least a way to cheat death, but even he had to admit that there was only the faintest hope of them surviving much longer.

Cassander was not a man to whom pessimism came easily, but it was taking considerable effort of will to keep its dark touch from infecting his thoughts.

When the Iron Warriors finally overcame the citadel’s ancient defences and broke open its walls they would run amok. They would slaughter his

warriors, the heroic men and women of this world that had chosen to stand with them, and the refugees from the murder fields below. Fifty-two Imperial Fists and thirteen thousand men, women and children were crammed within the citadel's walls.

When the end came, their deaths would not be quick and they would not be painless, but there was no talk of surrender or terms, no seditious mutterings to erode morale and no thought other than resisting these bastard invaders.

The Iron Warriors… our brothers…

No history told who had built this marvel atop the mountain, though the engineers and artisans who had raised its living walls must surely have been the greatest minds of their age. Wrought from stone and rock unknown to this world and laced with technologies whose secrets not even the Mechanicum could fathom, its walls reacted to damage like living tissue. Shell impacts would scab over with liquid silicates, and moments later the wall beneath would be whole again. Only when the hurt was so sustained and so catastrophic would any site of damage be irreparable. Attackers found the wall reacting to them with spiked extrusions of living rock, or were swallowed whole as the stonework opened up beneath them. Against any conventional foe, the fortress would have been, for all intents and purposes, impregnable and indestructible.

But the Iron Warriors were not conventional foes.

Lord Dorn had chosen the living citadel as the site upon which to plant the Aquila, not as a symbol of Imperial dominance, but a seat of governance to be shared by all. He had brought the planet's former rulers into the establishment of an ordered government, allowing the people to choose their own planetary governor, a respected civic leader named Endric Cadmus. Cassander smiled at the memory, thinking that perhaps some of the philosophy of the XIII Legion's primarch had permeated the Imperial Fists after all.

Cassander and his fellow Imperial Fists had escorted the expeditionary iterators and remembrancers as they went from cities to far-flung townships, spreading word of the Emperor to a people ripe to embrace the Imperial Truth. It had been a glorious time, and when Lord Dorn announced that he was to lead the VII Legion to fresh campaigns, the populace had mourned his departure like the loss of a loved one.

He remembered the pride that filled him when the primarch had given him the solemn duty of standing with his battle company as sentinels to the newly compliant world, a potent sign that this was a world under the protection of the Imperial Fists. But that honourable gesture was to have consequences that not even Lord Dorn could have foreseen.

Cassander wiped dust from his scarred face and spat a mouthful of the wretched stuff to the ground, where it bubbled with a chemical hiss. His helmet was long gone; a bolt-round had punched through the faceplate and blown out in a spray of blood, bone and ceramite. Techmarine Scanion had died early in the fight, and without his direction the forge-servitors were of only limited use when it came to repair work. A few Mechanicum adepts remained, but they spent their days in the heart of the citadel, plumbing its secrets as though there were still a chance they might live to relay anything they might find.

Cassander's features were careworn, as though abraded by the constant winds that scoured every smooth surface on this planet and gave it the texture of coarse sand. Eyes of deep brown that had seen the order of the galaxy overturned without any power to change it were deep-set and melancholic, his cheeks scar-blackened with the explosive passage of the bolt-round that had taken his helm.

When the order came to return to Terra, Cassander began preparations to depart immediately, but the sudden death of his vessel's Navigator had left them stranded until a replacement could be despatched. The following day, word of the Warmaster's treachery and the massacre on Isstvan V reached them, throwing Cassander's world into free-fall.

Pride in an honourable assignment was replaced by frustration and bitter disappointment that they could not fight alongside their brothers, could not call Horus to account for his perfidy and punish those who had trampled their oaths of loyalty into the dust.

But the chance to make war on the traitorous allies of Horus had come soon enough.

The Iron Warriors made planetfall in the wake of a saturation bombardment that reduced the valley and the agri-settlements filling its fertile deltas to ash. Magma bombs and mass drivers boiled away the rivers and reduced fecund earth to arid dust. The Cadmean Citadel was left untouched, and Cassander still found it difficult to believe that such a

precise bombardment was possible.

He knew why, of course.

The Iron Warriors could not pass up this chance to humble the sons of Dorn, and Cassander had rallied his men with grim certitude as the bulk landers of the IV Legion descended on towering columns of firelight.

The technological cunning of the ancient fortress builders, married to the artfully wrought geography and the courage of the defenders, had kept the Iron Warriors at bay for almost three months, but now Cassander's defiance was almost at an end. With three-quarters of his Company slain, and thousands of mortal soldiers dead, he was running out of ways to fight. The citadel had few heavy guns remaining to keep the Iron Warriors from bringing their artillery superiority to bear and overwhelming the citadel's inbuilt defence mechanisms.

The traitors could not be denied for much longer, but every day Cassander's warriors stayed alive kept the enemy from redeploying and bringing their strength to bear elsewhere.

A poor measure of success, but it was all Cassander had left.

He shook off such pessimism, knowing it did not become a warrior of the Imperial Fists to wallow in self pity, and moved to the edge of the northernmost bastion. Once its gleaming ramparts had been a proud example of the military engineer's art. Now they were chewed up ruins-in-waiting. Locris and Kastor crouched behind the largest nubs of dusty stone, golden giants amid the hundreds of dusty ochre-clad local militiamen. Cassander had broken up his few remaining squads, deploying his men throughout the defence to bolster each section of wall and provide strength of heart to the thousands of soldiers who fought alongside them.

The sky strobed with concussive impacts that buckled the air with their force. High explosives on ballistic trajectories flashed and screeched as their impact violence was dissipated by the void-umbra. The shields on the southern approaches were close to failing, but thankfully the enemy wasn't concentrating fire there.

Locris looked up as Cassander hunkered down in the lee of the rampart, and Kastor gave him a nod of acknowledgement.

'They're eager today,' said Kastor, as a thunderous detonation rocked the base of the wall. Kinetic dampers in the citadel's plunging foundations transferred the power of the blast deep into the bedrock of the mountain and

the smell of metal shavings and oily secretions wafted up from the silicate scabs forming over the craters. Rock fragments rained down onto the ramparts, blanketing the long line of soldiers in yet more red dust.

'Too eager,' agreed Locris. 'Something's happening, the pace has changed.'

Like Cassander, Locris went bareheaded; the same shrapnel fragment that split his battle helm in two had given him the long scar down his cheek and taken his left eye. The scar made him roguish, the eye piratical. Both were wounds to be avenged.

The plastron, pauldrons and greaves of Kastor's armour were scorched black where the firestorm of an incendiary projectile had peeled the paint from its plates as he shielded a group of wounded soldiers with his body.

'What do you think, captain? The Digger?' asked Kastor.

'I told you, Symeon's squad spotted the Digger in the east today,' said Locris. 'This feels like Scrapper's men.'

Cassander gripped the hilt of his sword and peered through a split in the rampart, where webs of connective stone tissue had failed to set, watching the uphill avalanche of burnished iron plate through a haze of dust. Smoke-wreathed artillery pits in sheltered batteries far below hurled high-velocity projectiles ahead of the climbing Iron Warriors, while mobile guns on walker platforms struggled to keep up with the assault force. This fresh attack was a salutatory reminder that Perturabo's sons were warriors first and foremost, siege specialists second. Cassander watched their movements, fluid and aggressive, disciplined yet driven by core-deep fury.

Where had such raw hate come from?

They had taken to distinguishing between the Iron Warriors detachments by giving their commanders derogatory appellations based on their most apparent characteristics. The Digger's men were bent-backed shovellers, methodical, precise and unstinting in their labours, the Malingerer kept his men in their dugouts as his artillery dropped tonnes of munitions on the citadel, the Voyeur liked to watch proceedings from a spike-topped blockhouse in the centre of the valley.

'I think you're right, Locris,' said Cassander.

Unlike his fellow commanders, Scrapper liked to throw his men at the walls if so much as a sniff of an assault opportunity presented itself. Where other Iron Warriors displayed a measure of caution towards the citadel's

defences and an appreciation for the careful, step-by-step methodology of siege warfare, Scrapper liked to get his legionaries bloody in the swirling crucible of combat.

Cassander dropped back into cover as a whining solid slug zipped overhead.

‘Makes it easier, I suppose,’ noted Kastor. ‘His men have no fire discipline worth a damn.’

‘Maybe not, but they’re hard fighters,’ said Cassander. ‘We give them insulting names, but don’t ever underestimate them.’

‘Duly noted, captain,’ said Kastor, placing a fist in the centre of his scorched breastplate.

Locris held up a spoon-handled detonator trigger and said, ‘You want the pleasure of these ones, captain?’

Cassander risked another glance through the rampart as the citadel’s artillery pieces opened up on the advancing Iron Warriors. Those guns alone weren’t going to make much of a dent in the assault force, but any thinning of the ranks could only be a good thing.

‘You do it,’ he said. ‘You’ve more than earned it.’

Locris grinned and mashed the trigger, detonating the last of the seismic mines dug into the northern slopes at the forefront of the Iron Warriors attack. Mushrooming blasts of tectonic shockwaves ripped a three-hundred-metre section of the mountain away and sent it tumbling downhill in a storm of pulverised rock.

Cassander relished the sight of scores of split-open bodies carried downhill in the raging avalanche, and pressed the throat bead of his borrowed vox.

‘All Fists – any movement in your sectors?’

Each of his section leaders replied in the negative, lending further credence to his growing certainty that this was Scrapper’s latest attempt to break the citadel open with a surprise assault. The tempo of the unequal artillery duel picked up as the Iron Warriors drew ever closer, climbing through the deep ditch carved by the seismic mines.

‘Symeon, Esdras, Phyros,’ said Cassander into his throat mic. ‘Re-deploy your men to the northern bastion immediately.’

The enemy artillery shifted their aim as the Iron Warriors closed the last hundred metres between them and the wall. Shells screamed on direct flight paths, slamming into the wall with pounding hammerblows that shook the

foundations of the mountain itself. A pressure wave of impact blew up and over the wall and the heat of incendiaries burned at the silicate scabs fighting to resist the detonations.

Cassander knew this was the last chance he would have to blunt the assault force before the Iron Warriors were tearing at the defenders.

‘Wait until they reach the closest markers,’ he ordered, bellowing in a voice that could reach from one end of the *Phalanx*’s training halls to the other. ‘Make every shot count or it won’t be Perturabo’s whelps you need to worry about!’

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